



Beltrán, Ana María

Their story, our story, my story: A narrative inquiry
on postgraduate international students' psychological
well-being experiences at the University of Oulu

Master's Thesis in Education

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Master's Degree Program in Education and Globalisation

2020

University of Oulu

Faculty of Education

Their story, our story, my story: A narrative inquiry on postgraduate international students' psychological well-being experiences at the University of Oulu (Ana Maria Beltrán)

Master's thesis in Education, 98 pages, 4 appendices

June 2020

This study focuses on the experiences of eight postgraduate international students at the University of Oulu in Finland. The thesis follows narrative inquiry as the research methodology and heart of the inquiry. The research puzzles (Clandinin, 2016) of this study seek to understand postgraduate international students' stories regarding psychological well-being experiences at the University of Oulu, and secondly, how psychological well-being services feature in research participants' stories. The thesis explores internationalisation in the Finnish higher education context, its history, current market-oriented governmental policies and challenges experienced at the institutional level. Then, the thesis presents the role of different psychological well-being support services for international students at the University of Oulu. In terms of the theoretical framework, multidimensional transitions experienced by international students when living abroad are described first, followed by a broad analysis of mental health, addressed from postmodern, positive, multidimensional and cross-cultural lenses. Counselling services are also analysed from a critical and dialogical standpoint.

The eight interviews of this study were analysed from a three-dimensional space data-analysis approach and creative research practices. The findings of this study are presented in two parts—*Their story* and *Our story*—both based on relational ontological commitment of the researcher. The thesis is meant to contribute to discussions about how international students experience multidimensional transitions at the University of Oulu, how these situations interrelate with their psychological well-being and the psychological well-being support services, and understand the gaps, miscommunications and implications that students' stories suggested. The value of this thesis lies in its holistic and narrative approach, which enables to conclude the study by opening new research puzzles. Finally, "My story" reflects on the researcher's personal story, recognising among other criteria, sincerity, vulnerability, relational ethics and researching on the borderlands as key drivers for evaluating this study.

Keywords: internationalisation in Finnish higher education, mental health, multidimensional transitions, postgraduate international students, psychological well-being.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is possible due to the friends and people who supported my research internship at the Student Union of the University of Oulu. Special thanks to Kauko and Sanna for orienting me, as well as every OYY board and staff member that helped me to carry this research. I want to give special thanks to my Kummis and Kummi family, they were the first guide in my arrival and always made me feel at home throughout my student journey. I want to remind my EdGlo family, that I will always carry you in my heart. Thank you dear “Cabin friends”, and my summer and tennis friends who made me live the happiest moments at Oulu. Thank you, those sisters who shared with me their difficult times, and together we reminded each other to fight every day, and day by day. To my beloved “baby shark” ambassadors and colleagues, who became an international community and family.

Thank you Magda, for supervising all this research journey and mostly, for teaching me to disrupt my own presumptions about theory, and also about life. Your theories and classes were transformative, and healing as well. I am grateful with Elina, who opened me the doors in the world of international research. All Edglo teachers and program coordinators were always kind and reminded me that each day in Finland was worth it. Special thanks to those friends who shared with me the narrative research process and those who dedicated their time in reading my thesis and gave me so constructive, reflective and encouraging comments.

En Argentina, agradezco a mis amigas que me acompañaron en todo este viaje, ida y vuelta. Gracias Meghan y Laura, mis hermanas internacionales. Finalmente, dedico esta tesis a mi hermosa familia, especialmente a mis padres por su amor incondicional. Gracias a mis hermanas y hermano por su ternura, apoyo y humor, que me hizo mantener firme un horizonte para el cual volver a casa. Mima, sos mi maestra de vida y me has inspirado a narrar historias, a aprender inglés y creer que la educación abre nuevos mundos. Querido Tata, me has brindado confianza para llevar a cabo una investigación académica, y me cuidaste “desde arriba” en Finlandia, y siempre. Nono, Nona y Vivi, gracias por despertar en mí el interés por comprender a nuestros ancestros del Norte. Consu, nunca hubiera llegado a Finlandia sin las alas que me ayudaste a construir, siempre serás mi modelo a seguir y agradezco ser tu ahijada. Por último, gracias Agustin, por tu bondad y amor sincero que me recordaron durante la última etapa de la tesis, que esta maestría me inspiró a renarrar mi propia historia de vida en Argentina.

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1 Introduction

This thesis focuses on understanding what kind of experience postgraduate international students have regarding their psychological well-being, and with psychological well-being support services, during their time at the University of Oulu in Finland. Finland is argued to be an emergent non-native English-speaking destination for studying abroad (Calikoglu, 2018). In the context of internationalisation of higher education, there is a need for more literature regarding comprehensive understanding of experiences of postgraduate international students in Finland.

First, this study contextualises the local and international higher education policies that frame postgraduate international studies. Moreover, it seeks to identify which psychological support services are provided at the University of Oulu for international students. The study attempts to understand which are some of the transitions, or multiple transition, that international students face when they study abroad.

In times of postmodernity, individualism and of multiple “truths”, this study draws attention to the different conceptions of psychological well-being from a cross-cultural approach. This discussion leads the researcher to review different models and approaches that address mental health and counselling services.

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the qualitative research methodology because of the thesis’ relational and narrative approach towards international students’ experiences. The participants interviewed in this study were eight postgraduate international students, studying in different faculties at the University of Oulu.

This study is organised in eight chapters. The first chapter provides an outline of the thesis, my position and aims as a researcher and introduces the research questions, which are identified as research puzzles in this thesis. This chapter also introduces the first part of this study’s findings, titled as “Their story”. Chapter 2 explains the contextual framework of this thesis. Chapter 3 and 4 discuss theories regarding international students' transitions in higher education and then, seek to define mental health from postmodern, positive and cross-cultural lenses. Chapter 5 explains narrative inquiry as the research methodology and heart of this thesis. Chapter 6, “Our story”, describes the second part of this thesis findings through a letter written to international students. Chapter 7 will discuss and interpret “Their story” and “Our story” findings. Finally,

the last chapter, “My story”, reflects on an evaluation and ethical considerations of this study. This chapter will also review my final thoughts and conclusion regarding the whole study.



1.1 Research puzzle

As discussed before, this study focuses on 8 postgraduate international students who study at the University of Oulu. This study seeks to understand and represent research participants' stories regarding their psychological well-being experience at an international higher education context, focusing as well on how psychological well-being support services feature in their stories.

Following narrative inquiry research methodology, I am guided by narrative thinking. In this way, I understand this thesis as a research journey which started from the midst of experience. Instead of research questions, this narrative inquiry is composed mostly around a particular wonder and framed in a research puzzle that has reformulated, and will continue to reformulate itself (Clandinin, 2016, p.42). The wonder is centered on international students' psychological well-being at the University of Oulu.

The guiding research puzzle of this thesis is:

How do postgraduate international students talk about their psychological well-being experience at the University of Oulu?

This main research puzzle is associated with a second research puzzle, concerned with:

How do psychological well-being support services feature in postgraduate international students' stories?

The narrative research design process of this thesis is centered on a research puzzle (Clandinin, 2016, p.42). Rather than expecting answers to research questions, a research puzzle allows me as a narrative inquirer to follow the sense of continual reformulation, search and re-search proposed by Clandinin & Connelly (2000, p. 124 in Clandinin, 2016, p.42). Following Clandinin (2016), narrative inquiry is markedly different from other methodologies also in the shift from question to puzzles. The reason to research on “puzzles” is because of how the research process starts, “in the midst” and it ends as well “in the midst, of experience” (Clandinin, 2016, p.43).

It is necessary to justify next the significance of this research, on a personal, practical and social level. Thus, I will locate my researcher position, being aware of my “personal inquiry puzzles” (Clandinin, 2016, p.36).

1.2 Locating and justifying the research journey

“Once you start a journey, the journey owns you” (Shope, 2006, p.165 in Trahar, 2009).

Throughout this research journey I position myself first as a member of the cultural diversity of international students' community. Following Sheila Trahar (2009), I locate myself as a practitioner researcher and “a member of the landscape” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.63). The postgraduate international students' stories analysed in this study will reciprocally dialogue with my story and theory, throughout the whole thesis. This dialogical approach is related to the research methodology of this study, which is narrative inquiry. Following Clandinin (2016), I will introduce three justifications for how narrative inquiry guided me through this uncertain research route.

First, there is a practical justification for this study which emphasises the journey over the destination. First, narrative inquiry enabled me to understand that the research process would

transform on its own into a journey, composed by a series of experiences. Since students' experiences under study are situated in a "puzzle" concerning different student medical health centers and counselling services located in Oulu, this thesis also considers the possibility of contributing to practice. By deeply understanding, and making visible how students deal with challenging situations in relation to their psychological well-being, I hope that services at the University and student health centers can access and possibly make use of the findings regarding how international students' psychological well-being experiences are shaped in this higher education context. However, returning to my position in this thesis, I should clarify that I am not a psychologist, nor a doctor, nor a counsellor. It is not my intention to provide any solutions in this thesis, neither is it the purpose of this methodology. This last point is interrelated with the social justification of the thesis.

The study has a continuous final destination- starting point cycle, in terms of raising awareness on the importance of listening to international graduate students' voices. The social purpose of this research is, therefore, to open the discussion of psychological well-being at the University of Oulu, in collaboration with the Student Union—OYY— and the students' community. Following the critical and reflective learning journey throughout my postgraduate course on Education and Globalisation at the University of Oulu, I will apply cross-cultural lenses to discuss the theoretical framework of this study's research puzzle.

There is also a personal justification for this thesis. This research journey compelled me to unpack or unfold my personal story to understand other postgraduate international students' stories, in relation to their psychological well-being at the University of Oulu. Then, I was not aware until the research participants' stories and my own story had travelled half of the journey, that relationality would be the heart of this thesis. An intersubjective and relational role is embedded with my research position as a narrative inquirer. Narrative inquiry enabled me to live and travel alongside others, learning to "pay attention to the relational aspects of identity, disruption, and discovery" (Caine, 2010, p.1308). Participants' stories have become part of my lived story, and my own story is under study as well. In other words, and justifying the title of this thesis, "their story" is "our international students' story", told through "my story".

1.3 Unfolding my story and personal significance of the research

The process of unfolding or "unpacking" my story encourages me to be honest with the readers of this thesis. The thesis topic was not a coincidence. My life story has been surrounded, in

different ways, by mental health disorders, learning from my father and grandfather professional experience as doctors. Moreover, my background in special education led me to work in the ‘borderlands’ between health and education. When practising this profession back home in Argentina, as well as in my work experience abroad, I had found a sense of a social purpose, when contributing to create “bridges” between health centers and educational institutions. Also, together with the interdisciplinary team I worked with, we regarded our students from a holistic approach that would prioritise students’ strengths and capabilities over their medical diagnoses. Then, in Finland, I lived through lots of challenges and vulnerable moments that provided me, indeed, with profound personal growth. Empathy and reciprocal trust helped me to hear other friends and postgraduate international students that were facing similar psychological well-being challenges. This topic of conversation would turn later into the gap of research that this thesis will address. Later, immersing myself in the narrative inquiry journey, I have modified my personal aim from finding solutions to these issues at the University of Oulu to raising more questions, based on stories that can continuously unfold.

1.4 Their story

This section presents the first part of findings. I will present in this section the research decision of changing the traditional structure of a thesis, which is related to coherence of a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a fluid research process, defined by continuity, interaction, and relationality (Clandinin, 2016). Instead of following structured nor linear steps, it is open to the stories of participants and the experience of the researcher. Narrative coherence is a key concept when considering narrative inquiry and the notions of journey and movement (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013). Coherence is not necessarily centered on ordering stories chronologically. Instead, seeking for narrative coherence is to sit with the stories, with each other telling and retelling the stories, composing ourselves in relation (Caine et al., 2013, p.578).

I found essential to present first the eight student participants of this study, applying their pseudonyms, aiming to begin wondering on the first research puzzle of this study, related to “*How do postgraduate international students talk about their psychological well-being experience at the University of Oulu?*”

Lien's story: Act for yourself

Lien shared a story of a hard-working student life, combining early working routine with university life. Lien's motivation to study abroad was because she wanted to get away from the pollution of her home country and experience the peace and quiet of a developed country such as Finland.

Lien reflected on a past romantic relationship that had taken place in an internship abroad, and how the break-up experience seriously had affected her psychological well-being. Lien's views on relationships were somehow connected to her perspective and experience regarding her parents' marriage. Another challenge that Lien faced was related to a problematic relationship with her roommate in Finland which forced her to change accommodation. She described the pain and physical symptoms that she felt when she could not deal with emotions. Lien reflected on how her mindset changed throughout her experience of depression. Lien pointed out the importance of Buddhist meditation and "taking action"—majorly on the individual level—to really change the situation or the self. In her words:

"But the most important thing is yourself (...) people can help you at one point or another, but they cannot solve your problem. And sometimes solving the problems means that you have to change yourselves, change your personality, change your mindset and only you can do that".

Rohan's story: I'm in the top of the mountain...Am I?

Rohan came to Finland seeking for opportunities of studying and working in a developed country. Rohan's study routine has been recently challenged by personal and social reasons. In the academic level, this situation has affected his student performance and communication with teachers. He shared how we felt forced to lie to one teacher:

"I lied to my professor that I'm very sick because of the cold weather, I'm having health issues, can I have the deadline extended? But I'm perfectly all right... but I had to lie because I did not submit my assignments, I didn't do anything, so this is my situation (...)".

Rohan's experience was mostly driven by a story of high motivation and ambition in settling goals through life, which gave him a positive perspective about overcoming his personal struggle, which he addressed as a "puzzle to solve". Rohan shared these words:

“Coming to the University of Oulu should not be the pick of my life, should do something even better then after that do something even better (...) This is just a stepping stone to the mountain top that I want to reach one day (...) My goal is to stand in a position where I think this is my best possible outcome”.

Aliya’s story: Pre-arrival struggles before Oulu

Aliya’s story contributed with a student perspective that goes beyond the life path in Finland. Aliya described the application process to her studies in Finland as an uncertain period. She highlighted how English language requirements can be stressful for international students. A central highlight of her story was a disappointing romantic relationship back in her society of origin. The break-up would later push her to seek for psychological support, and unexpectedly she had to face past traumas and work as well the relationship with her mother. She shared her “cultural shock” experience in Finland, comparing socio-cultural aspects between her home country and Finland, also including different perceptions of mental health. Aliya shared her thoughts regarding her society of origin, and shared a comparison with Finnish society:

“We don’t have psychology center. If you go to the hospital because you have mental issues, you will be labeled for the rest of your life. So, if compared to the students (back home) it would be like we were grouping to have fun, like need some support (...) But here people are kind of separated individual but somehow, they are connected with each other. It is different because usually the isolated individual (back home) it is hard to connect with each other. You should always be in the groups. So, if you are not always in the group one day you will be out of the groups and then you won’t get any contact so that is the difference”.

Mai’s story: Opening-up the silence for a better future

Mai’s story reflected openness and courage through the disclosure of a ‘hidden’ story of psychological well-being in which she accepted the help and support from others. Mai’s perception of a gap knowledge in a demanding Master study program overlapped with family problems in the beginning of her study path in Oulu. In her past, challenging experiences abroad with a highly competitive higher education culture had paved her way about how to manage herself socially in Finland. In order to perform well at her studies, she spent most of her time studying by her own in Oulu. Thus, as an international student, the credits to guarantee her scholarship turned to be an increasing bargain for her. Mai highlighted how important was to participate in

groups and activities outside the university to meet new people and reduce her anxiety or depression. In the end of the interview, Mai shared her optimism towards the future:

“I’m going to be less harsh on myself and less of a perfectionist and also trying to be more patient with other people and I try to understand them instead of mentally dismiss them... and I feel that I can improve, I will improve”.

Alan’s story: Preventing, comparing and taking action

Alan had been living abroad before coming to Oulu. An interesting point of reference for his story was to compare his psychological well-being experience in Oulu with his previous international student experience in another country, as part of his master studies. However, he acknowledged that comparing was a difficult task. Alan also pointed out how talking about feelings like being anxious had to be first dealt by himself, since he shared that talking to someone he would “barely” know would not help.

Alan’s student journey story focused mostly on identifying positive moments as well as moments of vulnerability and difficulties. Alan shared moments in which he felt more lonely or anxious, through noticing how habits in his daily routine were changing. These challenging moments would appear in his stories after winter, or after breaking-up relationships.

“I started to have this kind of it usually felt kind of anxious but I was not really able to describe what was going on... because at least the way it happens to be it’s not just staying home, being depressed. It’s just the level of anxiety and usually it happens when I eat I understand the difference, I eat more sugar, a lot of kind of small clues that get from my routine that I understand that something is out of base”.

Nesrine’s story: Here I am, I had another chance

Nesrine’s story described the different difficulties and disappointments throughout her student journey, along with the integration challenges with her Finnish partners. Courses started to become a bargain for her, in the sense of feeling stressed for achieving the necessary credits to maintain her scholarship. She described how her survival instinct helped her in difficult moments:

“I wasn’t functioning, but I never gave up...It’s like I have to try at least or something and then if I don’t say that I never tried. It’s just that I had to try...I don’t want to give up...even throughout the year I had those moments when I was quitting and then I came back to work a little bit and then coming back and forth. Let’s sleep these days, let’s try again...even throughout the whole year...but I wasn’t functioning. I wasn’t functioning at all”.

Nesrine firmly stated that she did not regret her experience. She shared how she learnt from new perspectives of people around the world, and to be independent. Not only did her story reflect resilience and the key role of faith and religion to overcome the most challenging situations, but also the importance of accepting help from friends and counselling professionals:

“I remember I was like the most period of my life where I was really religious...praying a lot, this helped me a lot, I think was praying to God to inspire me, tell me what to do, help me (...) I need someone to talk to (...) it was comforting to talk and I was telling : I hate Oulu, I hate this place (...). I think it was positive moment, it helped just to talk about it”.

Sangmu’s story: The roller coaster and identity quest

Sangmu’s story drew on making her “*dreams come true*” when living in Europe. In this sense, she had the opportunity to come to Finland, but also, she did a student exchange in another European country. For Sangmu, it was important to separate study life and self-development, even though she acknowledged how correlated they are together. On the one hand, her study life has been surrounded by a constant “miserable stress” that just “pulled” her “down” and “stopped” her from working on her master thesis. Sangmu recognised that the career choice that drove her to the University of Oulu was a decision not made by her, but by her parents. This past decision made her have contradictory feelings towards her studies, as well as her thesis. As for her study accommodation lifestyle, she felt in some point she had become a nomad, moving from one place to another. She compared her psychological well-being with a roller coaster.

On the other hand, from the self-development side, she described herself as highly motivated and passionate, driven to achieve her goals of finding the most original internships in Europe. She also talked about her identity:

“I think before I came to Finland I was I didn’t know who I am at all... like I don’t know, I feel like wearing kind of a collective mask.(...) I don’t know how to discover myself and I didn’t even know whether I can take off the mask or not”.

Thus, Finland enabled her to notice that:

“People really value their personal boundary here it’s like totally different (...) it is also such a liberating feeling for me like : Wow, I don’t need to be afraid of who I am now, I can just be myself and I can be proud of it”.

Purnima’s story: Identifying trigger points in a new context

Purnima’s student journey story identifies positive highlights together with trigger points which awaken fears and memories from the past, among other difficulties in relation to her psychological well-being. One of her main concern was focused on the weather in Finland and how it would affect her psychological well-being, and her friends as well.

“I think what was making me worry even then and even now, like during these months of transition is the approaching darkness....And it really involved some kind of crazy memories in me and I thought I had become better dealing with them but I think with the darkness everything becomes really low”.

Purnima referred to psychological well-being as a human experience with a holistic approach:

“Even well-being is very related to the cognitive functions and the cognitive load and the cognitive stress but we don’t but I’m just wondering if we look at students’ well-being as a kind of human experience... do we really care about their emotions and motivation?”

Their story: clarification for readers

Their story is a section that intends to guide readers in the following chapters, presenting this study as a holistic and non-linear narrative inquiry. Among different purposes, it has aimed to show how students’ stories have guided the research journey in a relational approach between theory and data. Other research methodological aims will be clarified later in the data analysis section (see Chapter 5, section 5.3.2).

2 International higher education context and psychological well-being support services

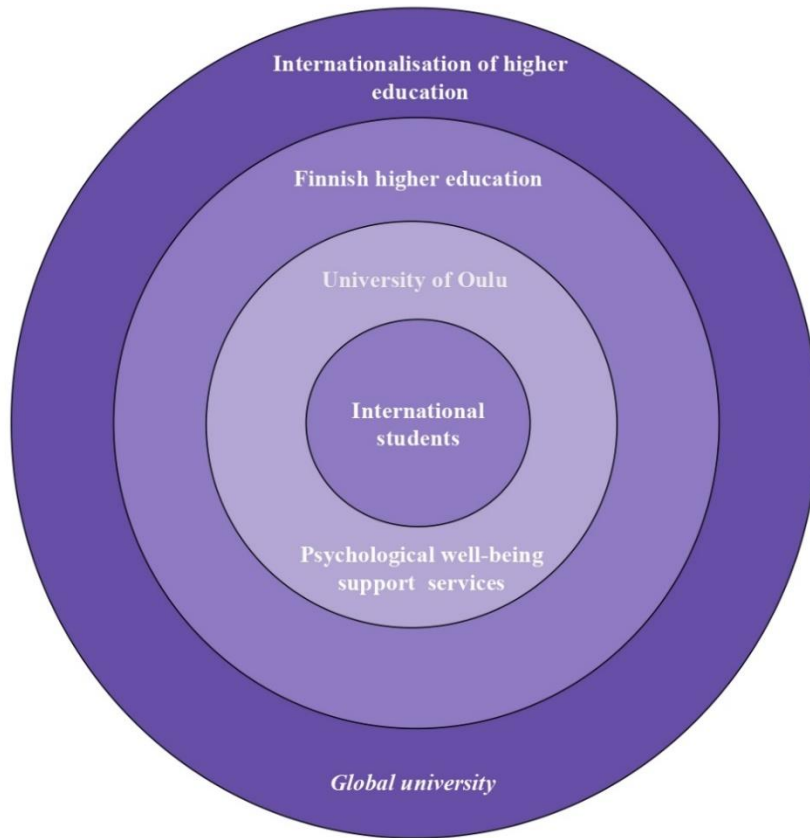


Figure 2. International higher education context and psychological well-being services

This figure reflects the chapter's purpose of contextualising the research participants' stories. First, internationalisation phenomenon in the Finnish higher education context will be reviewed, considering the term "global university" (Biesta, 2011). Particularly, different sections will go through the history, current market-oriented governmental policies, and challenges experienced at the institutional level regarding internationalisation in the Finnish higher education system (Cai & Kivistö, 2013; Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016; Medvedeva, 2018; Soler-Carbonell, Saarinen, & Kibbermann, 2017). Then, the thesis presents the role and some of the challenges experienced by psychological well-being support services for international students at the University of Oulu (OYY, 2019). *Psychological well-being support services* is a term that considers any actor (professionals, institutions, organisations and people) responsible for international students' psychological well-being and support situated at the University of Oulu, or in relation with this higher education institution.

2.1 Internationalisation and the global university

Internationalisation of higher education and international student recruitment have become key topics for government policies globally (Calikoglu, 2018, p.439; Saarinen & Nikula, 2013, p. 1). Globalisation has directly influenced internationalisation processes at higher education institutions, through a trend which increased competition and commercialisation (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p. 1-2). This trade approach model applied in international higher education promotes education as a private good, that should be paid by the individuals who are benefiting from it (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p. 15). In this sense, ideological shifts of this global phenomenon seem to be intertwined with financial changes, affecting the funding of universities as well as the individual students' responsibility of paying for higher fees (Biesta, 2011, p.35).

Biesta (2011, p.36) identifies this international phenomenon as the rise of the global university, which takes for granted that global capitalism and the logic of the market will benefit individuals in non-economic domains, including education. Hence, the global university fosters a relationship compared with an economic transaction where students are the customers, and the educational institution together with the educators are the providers. Biesta (2011) builds on this criticism towards current higher education institutions, describing their continuous obsession for quality, effectiveness, the competition for resources and for the same international student market.

Thereby, native-speaking English countries as well as non-native-English-speaking countries have converted their higher education systems and recruitment policies more appealing for international students (Calikoglu, 2018, p.439; Saarinen & Nikula, 2013, p. 1). This worldwide and "irreversible" trend has increasingly influenced Finnish government reforms as well (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p. 15). The global trend in Finland started to replace the traditional Finnish view of education as a public service for one that considers "international higher education as a means of generating extra revenue" (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.2). However, internationalisation as a process has been understood differently depending on the context and situation.

The section below will review the historical background and the different arguments concerning internationalisation in Finnish higher education, including challenges concerning universities' and students' agency. The aim is to understand a general picture of the context that post-graduate international students encounter in Finland. Then, in line with this thesis' research puzzle, psychological well-being support services at the University of Oulu will be identified, discussing the different roles and challenges the services face with international students.

2.2 Internationalisation in Finland

The Royal Academy of Turku was the first university in Finland established in 1640, under the Swedish rule. The university was renamed twice after it was moved to Helsinki-the new capital. First, it was renamed as the Imperial Alexander University and then, University of Helsinki (Soler-Carbonell et al., 2017, p.2). By 1917, when Finland proclaimed their Independence, the university had been complemented in the technical, economic and fine arts domains with a multi-disciplinary approach. Nevertheless, new multi-disciplinary and language-policy based universities had to be established because of the challenges between Finnish and Swedish as the two official languages. Indeed, the University of Helsinki itself went through language policy debates during the 1920s and 1930s.

In a global perspective, before times of the Second World War, German had been the key language of internationalisation. Thus, Finnish higher education internationalisation process had been led by Central Europe (Saarinen & Nikula, 2013, p. 3). After the Second World War and the political, cultural, and economic collapse of Germany, Finnish higher education policy issues shifted from language to regional expansion and structural development concerns (Soler-Carbonell et al., 2017, p.2). By the 1950s, the internationalisation orientation of higher education turned towards Anglo-Saxon countries, or English as the main language of instruction in countries such as Japan, Denmark, including Finland (Saarinen & Nikula, 2013, p. 3).

However, focused majorly on internationalisation of research staff and student exchanges, only after the late 1980s, internationalisation became a central topic in higher education policy in Finland. Decentralisation, more autonomy, and budgeting practice started to push institutions to perform in order to reach specific indicators, and consequently obtaining rewards. Internationalisation was perceived as an indicator of efficiency, together with quality, innovation, and effectiveness (Saarinen, 1997 in Saarinen & Nikula, 2013, p. 3).

During the 90s and 2000s, languages came back to the higher education policy agenda (Soler-Carbonell et al., 2017, p.2). There are certain arguments in favor of internationalisation in the region of Finland. One of the arguments favoring internationalisation is related to the benefits for European labour markets. Labour market can benefit from the high skills and talented international students that higher education institutions recruit (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.7). Internationalisation in higher education also is an effective means to contribute with mutual cultural awareness, and long-term economic cooperation opportunities with the student source coun-

tries (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.7). The promotion of global responsibility and multicultural society was also a key justification for this internationalisation process in Finland (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.98). However, internationalisation embedded with global competitiveness and marketisation prevail majorly in the governmental and universities' goals.

According to Kauko and Medvedeva (2016) internationalisation as marketisation has taken place in Finland via two processes, both connected to university funding: "the first process involved changing the funding formula to support more internationalisation, and the second concerned the imposition of tuition fees on students from outside the EU/EEA area, which was also eventually seen as compensating for budget cuts" (p.101). Funding of international higher education is less and less a primary public responsibility, since this market model promotes education as a private good (Marginson, 2004 in Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p. 2).

This legislation reform raises a controversial issue regarding the traditional higher education system for all students (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.2). Yet, the global trend and Finnish government perspective have progressively encouraged universities to implement, autonomously, fee-based and English-based programmes for non-European students (Calikoglu, 2018, p.440; Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.1, Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.98). In this way, as Kauko and Medvedeva (2016) argue, "having been on the agenda in Finnish policy-making for a decade, tuition fees for students outside the European Union and the European Economic Area became reality in the beginning of 2016"(p.98).

In Finland, in the same way as other European countries, it is argued that charging non-EU students would help to "make up for the dwindling public expenditure on higher education" (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p. 6). The Finnish government argues that previous fee-free system could not sustain the increasing number of international students (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.103). Tuition fees would therefore enhance the higher education resources, as well as they are argued to incentivise for higher-education institutions to enter and compete in the international markets (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p 102).

The application of tuition fees for foreign students in Finland remains as a sensitive subject, largely criticised by public opinion and student unions (Kauko and Medvedeva, 2016, p. 103). Its implementation was delayed on several occasions because of ideological split inside the political debate, particularly in terms of its compatibility, or not, with the "the overall design of the education system based on a universal model of welfare" (Kauko and Medvedeva, 2016,

p.111). Cai and Kivistö (2013) argue that the policy of implementing the tuition fee in international higher education should clarify what is expected from recruited international students (p.7).

Soler-Carbonell et al. (2017) also describe how the fundamental Finnish perspective of universities as national and public institutions has been challenged since the 2000s by deep legislative and structural changes. Universities have been changed into public law entities or private institutions, and most of universities of applied sciences have been turned into limited companies. More autonomy to universities enabled the institutions to define language of tuition and degrees (Soler-Carbonell et al., 2017, p.2). In this way, and same as other Nordic non-native-English-speaking countries, Finland started to invest intensively in higher educational reforms in the 2010s to compete as a regional hub (Calikoglu, 2018, p.440). The Nordic region has positioned as an appealing area for students because of their level of welfare, English programmes and high-quality education (Calikoglu, 2018, p.440).

The development of attractive international master's programs became the core of internationalisation within the universities, to make them more visible and competitive (Medvedeva, 2018, p.223). At the same time, these short-term degrees, differently from longer bachelor studies, foster international mobility and meet professional motivations of students. However, the benefits are limited since from the individual and institutional perspective, "it is a challenge for students to complete the degree within a two-year timeframe (not least because of the unavailability of course and lack of supervision), learn Finnish, and integrate sufficiently to find a job" (Medvedeva, 2018, p.223). What can be perceived as a flexible degree offer, can turn into a sustainable challenge for the University to assure the academic input.

It is therefore necessary to understand each university's reality and role in the internationalisation process. Despite ideological debates, Kauko and Medvedeva (2016, p.98) argue that internationalisation has become as part of the everyday governance of Finnish universities and marketisation appears at different operational levels. Medvedeva (2018) argues that the impact of internationalisation is conditional to each context and specific university. In other words, universities in Finland differ in their strategies and opportunities to internationalise (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.106).

In this sense, institutional agency plays a key role to understand how internationalisation is framed in Finnish higher education institutions. It is important to discuss diverse challenges and communication gaps between policies at the governmental level, and the decisions taken

at the department level of each university. Internal dynamics of universities governance modes have also been increasingly modified. Collective and academic governance shifted towards an instrumental, managerial, and top-down governance (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.107). Kauko and Medvedeva (2016, p.110) observe a dual role of universities. The first role is associated with a community of scholars —the bottom-up departmental governance—, whereas the second role is seen as an instrument for government policy —top- down state governance. Medvedeva (2018) argues that “policy-level discourse prioritizes the applied, practical value of internationalisation, which brings quick results”, affecting university practices (p.223). Hence, a problematic intersection between the two types of governance is reflected in the gap between top-down large-scale planning with the everyday life at the university department level (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.111; Medvedeva, 2018, p. 226). Administrators and teachers generally deal with governmental macro goals, challenged by funding problems and frequent changes in planning. The weakness of university’s agency affects the communication and participation of the staff and students, generating certain gaps in the internationalisation everyday practices ((Medvedeva, 2018, p. 216-217). For instance, internationalisation policies do not entirely address integration issues of international students. Meanwhile, the department level encounter with the practical integration of students as prerequisite for internationalisation (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.109). Language barriers, integration into the academic life and pressure to graduate quickly are the most common problems that international students encounter in Finnish higher education institutions, which affect in consequence their understanding of labour market (Medvedeva , 2018, p.221). Furthermore, the host institution becomes a main reference point for international students, in terms of how it is expected at the department level to assist students with the everyday issues. In this way, it is expected that universities will guide the newcomers to reach services such as immigration, housing, transportation, taxation, and medical centers (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.109). The department level concern can be represented by a “transnational education discourse on the individual level that concerns questions of integration, academic communication, study focus and curriculum content” (Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.111).

At macro-level dimension, top-down policies are argued to underestimate individual representations of internationalisation, from students and staff’s perspectives (Medvedeva, 2018, p.225). At the micro-level dimension, the university’s approach to diversity plays a key role on the internationalisation everyday practice (Medvedeva, 2018, p.225). At the micro and stu-

dent level, Medvedeva (2018) describes an inevitable gap between the individual's expectations and practices. For instance, the diverse educational backgrounds are difficult to anticipate. Also, the value of internationalisation is often situational, drawing on the participants' individual resources of a class. Constant changes at the institution level, combined with lack of resources affect both institutional and individual agency.

Calikoglu's (2018) research in Finland discussed some interesting points regarding the adaptation phase for university life of eleven postgraduate international students. The participants of Calikoglu's (2018) study argued that information access, organisational and guiding support from the staff was rather limited. One student compared with this previous experience abroad, where university life orientation was recognised as more structured than Finland. Problems of miscommunication or no communication were related to the "huge" barrier of information mostly transmitted in Finnish (Calikoglu, 2018, p.447). Not only did international students point out the gap in access to necessary information related to academic affairs, but also to social events in English. Some of the issues brought up by the students interviewed included Finnish language and social barriers for integrating with Finnish students (Calikoglu, 2018, p.448). To counter this problem, several participants suggested "units and activities aiming to create opportunities to meet with and learn from other people" (Calikoglu, 2018, p.448).

Students recognised some academic challenges such as lack of supervision and courses in English, pointing out the "insufficient teaching quality in English" (Calikoglu, 2018, p.447). Calikoglu's (2018) interviewees highlighted that studying in Finland required more than academic, English or research skills. It is necessary to consider international students' capability of coping with different situations and resources, as well as their capability of applying diverse social, cultural understanding, language, personal and professional skills. Finland was described, by one of the research participants, as an experience of survival. Nonetheless, social discrimination was associated with examples of international perceptions on how "students can be treated according to their background" (Calikoglu, 2018, p.449). One student shared an example of students who would not fit in the positive stereotypes of a good foreigner for Finnish society, would work in cheap jobs which would not demand Finnish language, generally in night shifts which would take time of studying Finnish and courses, getting even lower jobs. This can generate a vicious circle which can end up in depression or the student going back to their home countries (Calikoglu, 2018, p.449). Also, limited housing offers, and high cost of accommodation were also emphasised and identified as social and financial challenges for students. Related to this thesis's central issue, international students also indicated experiencing several

personal and psychological challenges, such as “feeling like a foreigner or an outsider”, loneliness and difficulties in meeting new people. Therefore, students “underlined the need for tools, units and organisations to meet other people” such as the student union (Calikoglu, 2018, p.450). However, not all students would prefer to participate at informal social gatherings to meet new people.

This section can conclude with Medvedeva’s (2018, p.230) argument on addressing internationalisation as a multidimensional process, in which the university’s role is to foster participatory practices and negotiate a common ground, “making fluid practices sustainable and maintaining education value”. It is argued that the gap between planning and practices can be mitigated opening the communication between institutional agency and students. In this way, the host university can communicate which interpretation of internationalisation, and educational provisions are running in the institution. The difficulties that international students encounter in Finnish higher education institutions could be identified in a more dynamic way. This can be connected to Biesta’s (2011) argument on understanding university as an historical construction, differing in local and national contexts. Thus, internationalisation “acquires its meaning in context, and each educational system and institution tailors internationalisation to its needs” (Medvedeva, 2018, p.230).

2.3 University of Oulu and psychological well-being support services

Oulu is a city located in North Ostrobothnia, Finland. The University of Oulu fosters internationalisation with a strong scientific profile, which enables the institution to receive supplementary funding to build centers of excellence (University of Oulu, 2012 in Kauko & Medvedeva, 2016, p.106). In terms of its internal dynamics regarding how the University and psychological well-being support service address students’ concerns, I will review in this section findings from a research report I carried out in November of 2019 for the OYY, or Student Union of the University of Oulu. The report combined different qualitative data collection research methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten staff members and students related to mental well-being services and/or experiences with international students’ mental well-being. Furthermore, an online questionnaire collected information about 78 international students’ experiences with psychological well-being services at the University of

Oulu. Inductive thematic analysis was applied to combine students and staff answers in different themes and subthemes. Below, findings of this report will be reviewed in connection to the contextual framework of this thesis.

The University of Oulu offers different guidance and support services for students, through the different stages of their studies. Some services are more general and provide students with guidance regarding planning the studies, writing the thesis, internship, and daily life matters. Other services are more specific to psychological well-being, such as the Finnish Student Health Services. The *Finnish Student Health Services* supports international students with daily life challenges, such as language and weather in Finland. The Finnish Student Health Service's staff argued that personal characteristics and previous experiences with psychological well-being services play a key role in students' decision of seeking for help (OYY, 2019). Cultural background may also influence students' perceptions of health, in a different way from Finnish perceptions of health (OYY, 2019). Language and sociocultural barriers, together with lack of resources are difficulties that the Student Health Center recognised to cope within the daily routine, particularly with international students.

Study psychologists offer confidential and special guidance in relation to students' learning, studying, life and time management and well-being issues. The findings of the report showed that most common issues addressed at study psychologists' consultation were time and stress management as well as study planning (OYY, 2019). Study psychologists mostly work from a preventive role, focusing on studying techniques. Their work supports FSHS role, recommending if needed students to contact the health services.

The Student Union Social affairs responsible cooperates with Finnish Student Health Service and with study psychologists by guiding students to their services. The specialist works in groups related to the students' well-being, such as Finnish Student Health Service's Health Working Group, Students' Well-being Working Group and Equality and diversity working group. For example, OYY participates in the board of directors of FSHS unit in Oulu whose tasks are to monitor the Health Service Unit and changes in the operational environment, health promotion and community health actions. In terms of the Student Union Board, an *OYY board member* does not directly advise or give personal help to students, focusing more on advocacy and general work in the executive board. They work with trainings for tutors or other activities in various organisations under OYY. They advocate with university workgroups related to social affairs such as well-being group and Equality and Diversity workgroup. Their personal

work is related to well-being in aiming for usually bilingual and accessible information to both Finnish and English-speakers.

Other interesting actors in relation with psychological well-being support for international students are the university chaplain, course teachers, tutor teachers and Kummi tutor students. The *university chaplain's* function is focused on religious and worldview matters, as well as emotional and relationship concerns of students. The *course teacher* can advise for the individual course. *Tutor teacher* is responsible for advising students with questions related to their field of study and personal study plan, helping them to move smoothly through their studies. This role has more workload during first year of students, when they are adapting to the new program. Being part of the counselling system and curriculum, *Kummi tutor students* are senior students responsible for helping all new degree and exchange students when studies start at University of Oulu. Tutors belong to the same field of study and have been trained for tutoring. This activity is considered as a preventive service, helping new students to integrate to the university life. Both Kummi student tutors and teacher tutors' level of commitment to listen and guide students can play a key role in shaping students' studies and perceptions of psychological well-being services (OYY, 2019).

In a broader perspective, the report findings raised criticism towards post-modern society and the University neoliberal policies. The society can force students to race against others, but particularly the race against themselves and perfectionism can undermine more students' mental well-being. Locally, limited resources and time for meeting students in face-to-face situations would undermine the tutor teachers and teachers' possibility to identify challenges that students would be facing in terms of mental well-being.

Most psychological well-being services recognised room for improvement in terms of psychological well-being awareness, training and collaboration. The Finnish Student Health Service (FSHS) recognised how limited resources would affect the availability of booking services and of English-speaking professionals. Overall, this socio-cultural context may give students reasons to believe that they can overcome situations by themselves and with no need of asking for support. The report finally concluded that allocating the necessary time, resources and professional training can be a first step to strengthen the university's culture awareness regarding psychological well-being (OYY, 2019)..

3 A multidimensional theoretical framework

This chapter will explore multidimensional theoretical lenses that address postgraduate students' transitions when studying abroad. Among the diversity and different categories of international students (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.3), considering the limited scope of this study, I will focus on postgraduate-taught international students in the Finnish context.

The chapter first seeks to understand the factors that lead postgraduate international students to choose Finland as the host country for their studies. Push-pull model together with other theoretical perspectives underpin this thesis understanding of students' motivations as well as their regional and socio-cultural background. Then, the second part of this chapter addresses multiple transitions that international students may experience while adapting to the socio-cultural aspects of the host country and the university life.

Understanding international students' motivation

The push-pull model framework seeks to explain the motivations that guide international students to decide their destination choice, focusing as well on the flow from developing to developed countries (Calikoglu, 2018, p.443). This model differentiates "push" factors from "pull" factors (McMahon, 1992 in Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.11). Cai and Kivistö (2013, p.11) describe push factors as those which generally arise in the home country and "push" the individuals' interest for studying overseas. On one hand, economic and educational dimensions of the home country can be considered examples of push factors. Pull factors, on the other hand, originate in the host countries and aim to distinguish from other study destinations (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.11). The theory argues that after the student considers distinctive pull factors, such as the quality of the program and financial aspects for an international student, the last step is to select the institution in the host country (Cai & Kivistö, 2013, p.11-12; Calikoglu, 2018, p.441).

Even though the push-pull model has been useful when researching the flow of international students in native-English-speaking countries, Calikoglu's (2018) study and recent literature have been guided by this framework in non-native-English contexts. Calikoglu (2018) researched students' experiences regarding their motivations and challenges while studying in Finland, as well as future plans and expectations after finishing their studies abroad (Calikoglu, 2018, p.440). The decision of studying abroad in Finland was a result of key motivation factors for students, such as education quality reputation and free higher education. Kauko and

Medvedeva (2016) add that the interest for the study program, as well as the focus for further opportunities offered have also been mentioned by students that chose to study abroad in Finland (p.110). The role of information and advertising channels have been identified as crucial for students informing themselves about Finland's education and school system. Finland's low-cost study options also influenced participants' decision; some of them compared the Finnish tuition costs advantage over previous study experiences in native-English-speaking countries, affecting their decision on where to study their postgraduate courses (Calikoglu, 2018, p.446). Other economic factors that would motivate students to choose Finland were underlined as the potential job opportunities and advanced economic conditions. Another pushing factor to study abroad emphasised by international students are the socio-cultural motivations and development opportunities (Calikoglu, 2018, p.446). Nonetheless, several limitations of the push-pull model have been identified in explaining students' personal experiences nor the student flow from developed countries to Finland. Moreover, the model is criticised for not addressing the association between students' expectations and the political economy. Thereby, regional, economic, and geographical conditions are argued to play a key role when understanding students' motivations, expectations and experiences (Calikoglu, 2018, p.452).

Students' personal cultural background also needs to be considered since international student may compare academic, social, financial, and psychological challenges they face studying in the current non-native-English-speaking country with previous experiences. Several studies with international students have argued that culture distance can significantly influence the transitions, differentiating social and cultural adjustment of international students according to their different geo-cultural regions (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). Thereby, "international students with small cultural distances relative to host-national students had lower transitional problems than students with large cultural distances" (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.4). Research has shown, indeed, that international students' adaptation can be influenced by the students' previous expectations before arriving to the host country and new reality —either related to the education dimension or daily life (Zhou et al., 2010 in Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.2).

The multidimensional transitions of international students' adaptation

It is largely known how international students can benefit themselves when studying abroad in a broader academic, cultural, and economic level (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). The host country and the university that participate in the process (Zhou et al., 2008, p.64) can enrich as

well from being exposed to multiculturalism and diversity (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.1). Yet, international students might experience multiple transitions when moving abroad. Transition is associated with an ongoing process which begins when the students fulfil their aspirations of studying abroad (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.2). When receiving scholarships or being admitted in highly competitive environments, this transition process can indicate high academic esteem for the international student. However, Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) point out that a sense of satisfaction as well as a sense of loss can come together with the new international student identity (p.2). Students might encounter differences and challenges related to the language, social and organisational cultures of the country and the institution. In addition, other differences might be experienced by students in the academic and daily issues (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.2). In this way, educational changes and life transitions intersect together as part of the international student experience in a new environment. International research has categorized the broad range of obstacles that international students face in new study environments into different categories such as: academic challenges; financial difficulties and socio-cultural and psychological problems, such as culture shock, adaption, isolation, loneliness and discrimination (Calikoglu, 2018, p.439; Bang & Montgomery, 2013).

Studying abroad can be considered as an intercultural experience which involves both domestic and international contexts and cultures interacting (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010, p.10). Individuals may feel overwhelmed in the initial phase of this cross-cultural and intercultural experience when they attempt to manage the cultural differences (Gu et al., 2010, p.11). Intercultural adaptation processes comprise a certain grade of fragmentation where international students are engaged “in continuous negotiation and mediation with the surrounding environment, self-analysis (of their values and beliefs), self-reflection, and self-reorientation” (Gu et al., 2010, p.11). In this way, a wide range of personal, environmental, and situational factors come into play which influences the adaptation process. For example, location, accommodation and the degree of contact with native speakers are important situational variables to consider in an intercultural experience (Coleman, 2004, p. 583). Personal factors include biographical, affective, cognitive aspects, adding to the previous language learning skills of the student, their motivation, attitudes, anxiety, academic strategies and learning style (Coleman, 2004, p.583). Thereby, not only culture but also identities, motivations and power relations between learners and teachers are key determinants of intercultural adaptation in the academic dimension. Furthermore, it is largely argued that intercultural experience “can be a transformative learning

experience process which leads to a journey of personal growth and development” (Gu et al., 2010, p.11).

It is important to bear in mind that these multiple transition processes (identified as multi-dimensional transitions) imply decisions that have an impact on international students’ personal and academic life, as well as employment opportunities, but also in people surrounding them (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.2-3). Next, I will address terms and theories that explain the process of adaptation to a new culture and education system when international students begin their experience of studying abroad. Terms such as acculturation (popularly known as cultural shock) will be addressed. Then, theoretical frameworks of acculturation will be discussed.

Acculturation

Culture shock is a popular term, which in research has been associated with the process of acculturation. Several models have been proposed to understand acculturation processes in connection with psychological processes that migrants experience abroad. The first studies would focus mostly in the stress and coping strategies of migrants, regarding acculturation as a state (Zhou et al., 2008, p.67). Latest studies have included the mutual interaction between the host and migrants, exploring potential barriers and enablers included in diverse ecosystems (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6). This study understands acculturation as a non-linear and complex process and experience of change, reflected on the degree of cultural adjustment and identity change of individuals, as a result of dynamic interaction between two or more cultures (Bang & Montgomery, 2013, p.344; Berry, 2005 in Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.4; Fassaert et al., 2011, p.63; Zhou et al., 2008, p.63).

As regards the psychological well-being of international students, Berry’s (1997 in Jin & Wang, 2016, p.59)) acculturation framework explain how the adjustment outcomes and psychological distress of international students can be predicted by preexisting psychological factors together with other co-variables factors that arise during the adjusting process, such as social support or coping strategies (Jin & Wang, 2016, p.60). One of these models, which is pertinent to analyse international students’ experiences is the ABC model.

The affective-behavioural-cognitive model

Defining and understanding the affective-behavioural-cognitive (ABC) model is a key issue in

this study. This model interrelates comprehensive contemporary theories on acculturation which regard the individual—in this study, the international student—as a proactive agent who is able to respond and resolve the changes and challenges embedded with the environment (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6, Zhou et al., 2008). The theoretical framework for the “ABC” model is provided by an interrelational “culture synergy” between stress and coping (A), culture learning (B), and social identification theories (C). In other words, ABC stands for the affective, behavioral and cognitive aspects of cultural adaptation.

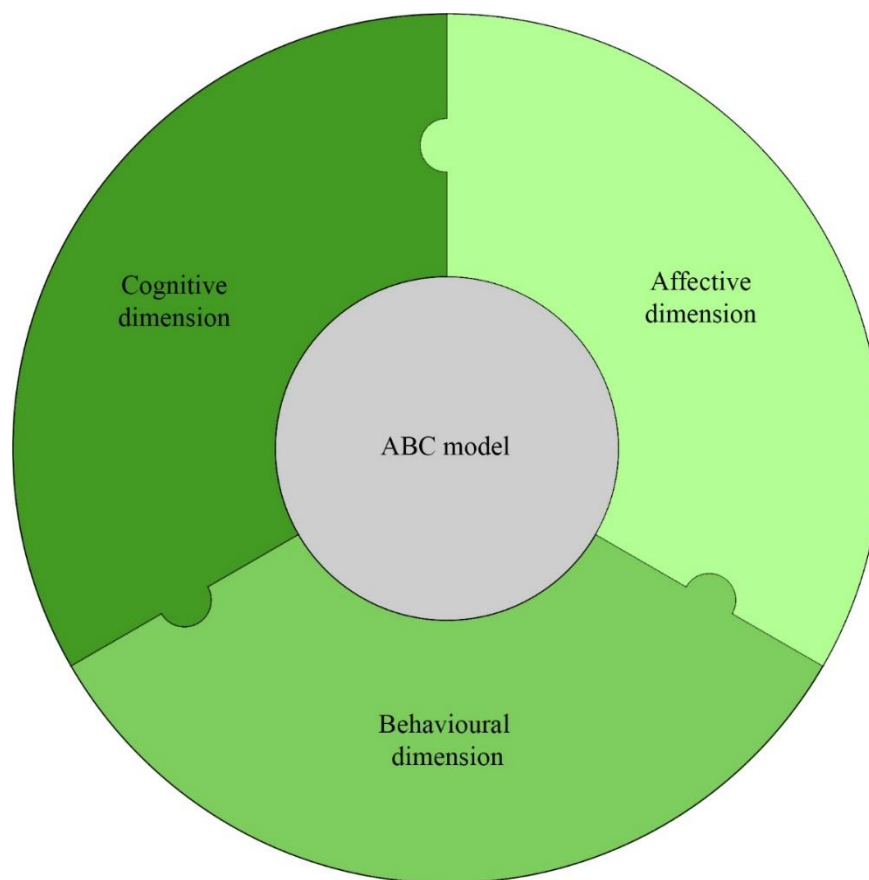


Figure 3. The affective-behavioural-cognitive (ABC) model

First, the A (affective) component, provided by stress and coping theories, considers life changes as intrinsically stressful. In this sense, an international student would need to develop coping strategies to stressful adjustment situations. The adjustment factors applied by the individual depend on aspects such as the individuals’ personality and situational factors such as social support, and the degree of life change (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6; Zhou et al., 2008, p. 65). Hence, the shock of a life change is understood from an active process of managing the stress in the individual and situational level.

Secondly, culture learning theories are based on social psychology and focus on the behavioural dimension (B) of the social and intercultural contact (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6; Zhou et al., 2008, p.65). Through this approach, “the international traveller needs to learn culturally relevant social skills not only to survive but to thrive in the new country” (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6). Hence, the “shock” and international student experiences is defined from the “stimulus for acquisition of culture-specific skills that are required to engage in new social interactions” (Zhou et al., 2008, p.65). The different variables identified that may influence this process of adaptation are the general knowledge about the new culture, length of residence in the host culture, language or communication competence, quality and quantity of contact with host nationals, friendship networks, previous experience/s abroad, cultural distance, temporary versus permanent residence in a new country and cross-cultural training (Zhou et al., 2008, p.65).

Lastly, social identification theories explore the adaptation process from cognitive-centered approaches (C). The premises of these theories consider during cross-cultural transitions, the international student’s adjustment is influenced by cultural similarity, knowledge of the host culture and mutual attitudes of hosts and sojourners (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6). Cultural identity changes occur when sojourners may perceive themselves as “little fish in bigger ponds”, since the new broader context can provoke anxiety from changes in perceptions of self and identity (Zhou et al., 2008, p.67). Furthermore, Jindal-Snape & Rienties (2016, p.6) highlight that cultural identity changes may also affect cultural intergroup interactions.

Overall, the ‘cultural synergy’ ABC model proposes a multi-dimensional framework for understanding the processes implicated in the acculturation of international students (Zhou et al., 2008; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). What is important to highlight for this thesis is how this theory redefines the term “cultural shock” with “cultural adaptation, which can also be translated in the international education experience: instead of pedagogical shock, we discuss here the term “pedagogical adaptation”. Even though this model contemplates the multi-faceted experiences of students, there is a criticism on how it seems to concentrate more on the individual’s capability of adapting and disregarding “how the environment can be changed to suit the needs of the individual” (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.7).

In addition to the ABC framework, other theoretical models also address acculturation processes of international students and complement the ABC model previously explained. First,

because this thesis is centered on postgraduate international students' psychological well-being, it is important to consider a theoretical model that considers education and life transitions. Educational and life transitions (ELT) model understands that international student experience certain changes in their education and life dimensions (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.7). These transitions are not exclusively negative, they are also opportunities in a positive perspective. Depending on each individual's cognitive appraisal, international students may have to face with sociocultural and lifestyle stressors, which indeed can be connected with academic stressors. For example, language can be not only part of life transitions, but also it can act as major academic stressor for international students. Also, this model argues that international students "can have different experiences in different aspects of their academic and everyday life with one aspect being positive and the other negative at the same time" (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.7). For instance, academic attainment of students might be undermined by financial difficulties connected to problems of finding accommodation. Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) identify this situation as a downward spiral where students might get distracted from studying effectively and from adapting to the new academic expectations (p.7). When negative situations overpass the opportunities, the student might not even feel the positive experiences. Nevertheless, when the positive experience is stronger, it could function as a "buffer" for the negative experiences. These transitions experiences act dynamically. Research has shown that either international students or host-national students-when moving to a new city for example- they first give priority to the daily life and accommodation issues, for later focusing on academic adaptation. However, the focus might shift back to the life issues in some point of the second year, and then back to academic issues (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.8).

Secondly, the Ecological systems theory model argues that international students are not only affected by the social interactions, but also policies of the university and the host country have influence on them. This model is related to the contextual framework of this study (see Chapter 2), which has discussed internationalisation in the global and Finnish context, and the psychological well-being support services that surround international students at the University of Oulu. This theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979 in Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016) classified, hierarchically, the ecological systems that surround the individual, from the closest ones to the most remote ones, such as microsystem and macrosystem (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.9). The macrosystem refers to the broader cultural context surrounding the individual that includes the cultural and societal belief systems, norms and laws that indirectly affect the

person (Onwuegbuzie, Collins & Frels, 2013, p.5). Hence, the environment of the student is interrelated with immigration and education policies as well as significant others, and it needs to be considered when understanding student migration (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016).

The next model is based on Resilience Theory. This theory contributes with this study in considering how international students cope with adversity in terms of psychological well-being in a higher education context. Resilience is defined as “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of substantial adversity” (Luthar, 2006 in Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.10). When experiencing multiple transitions, numerous changes and stressor may act as adversity on the international student, and for that reason resilience plays a key role in this stage of adaptation. Thereby, internal protective factor such as self-esteem, and external protective factors, like supportive relationships at home and university, help to buffer against the multiple risks at the time of transition. It is argued that the stronger the social support systems —external issues—, and how communication skills are applied, international students are more likely to adjust to life in the foreign country (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). However, these support networks can easily become risk factors when they are not doing well.

Jindal-Snape & Rienties (2016, p.11) associate the resilience theory with aspects of the ABC model. Resilience is not static, nor inherent to the individual and it changes across contexts. Understanding how supportive or not is the environment is equally important as understanding that education and life transitions than can stress international students. Finally, “it is the responsibility of the host university to provide opportunities to develop strong social and academic networks to enhance the students’ resilience” (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.11). It is necessary to clarify that international students’ transitions affect not only the individual but also, they may have an impact on their families, friends and work colleagues. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research regarding more holistic views of transitions, since most of studies, like the thesis in hand, focus on the learner alone.

After addressing through this chapter the multidimensional transitions of international students’ cultural and pedagogical adaptation, the next chapter will address more specifically mental health, postmodernity, psychological well-being and counselling services, which are key to understand this study’s research puzzles.

4 Postmodern, positive, and multidimensional approach to mental health

This chapter will explore the postmodern era and its relation to individuals' mental health and the provision of counselling services. Then, from cross-cultural lenses, different approaches to define mental health will be reviewed. The figure below represents the themes that will be discussed in this chapter.

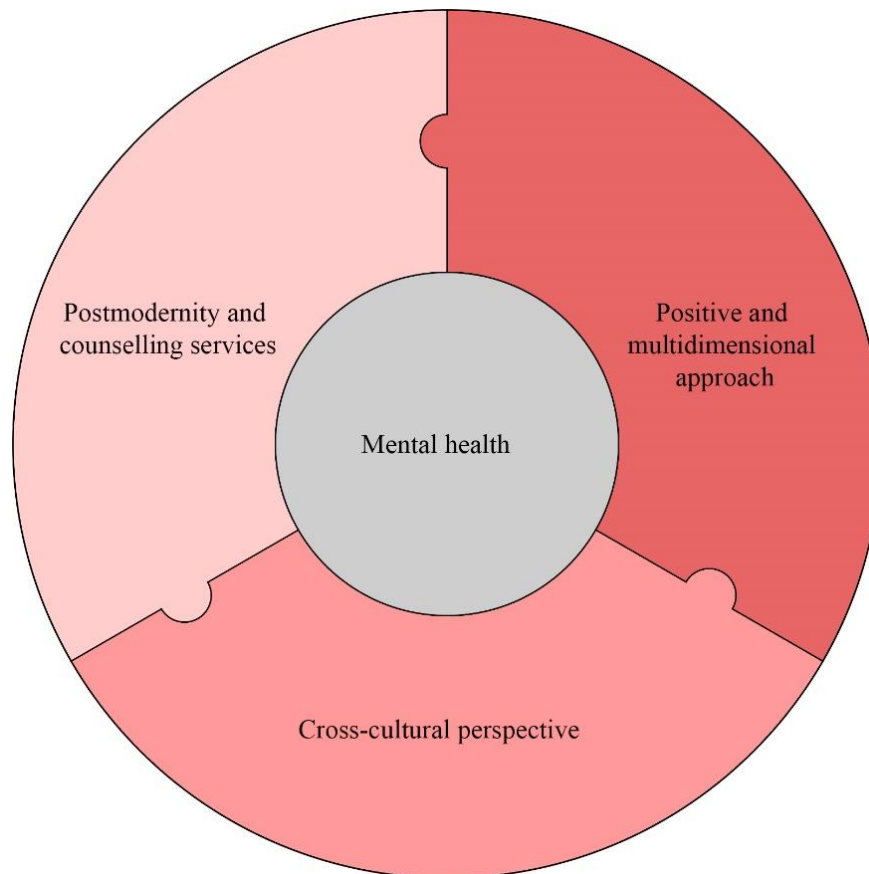


Figure 4. Postmodern, positive, and multidimensional approach to mental health.

4.1 Postmodernity and mental health

Postmodernity is largely known for its break with the past in terms of deconstructing conventional social and moral arrangements in culture, art and life (Kelly & Charlton, 2003, p.77-78). Life and reality are characterised for contingency, paradoxes, and uncertainty. According to Whitley (2008), postmodernity can be defined as a “comprehensive and rapidly changing milieu” that has not only affected the economic, familial, cultural, religious and demographic axes

of society, but also population's mental health (p. 352-353). Defining postmodernity contributes with understanding how contemporary societies are constantly changed by rapid social transformations, and how this phenomenon affects individuals' mental health.

Whitley (2008) argues that one significant change in the postmodern era is associated with individualisation (p.353). Traditionally, institutions such as families, local communities, trade unions and religious associations have acted as structures which provide people with a sense of fellowship, meaning to life and identity. This *ontological security* is defined as "strong sense of constancy, reliability, and continuity the material, social, and cultural conditions of everyday life" and a "precursor to generic psychological well-being" (Whitley, 2008, p.353). However, in the postmodern era, the increasing detachment of people from these traditional structures destabilises the ontological security (p.353). This process of individualisation is characterised by the creation of an *empty self*, decoupled from meaningful connections, constantly filling this emptiness with consumerism, extreme politics and fears regarding risks and unpredictability (Whitley, 2008, p.354).

Postmodernity is embedded as well with globalisation and technological developments, raising supra-individual level concerns on lack of stability in the economic, social security and environmental aspects. Individually, people are concerned about lack of stability in their work, financial status and marriage. A "narcissistic retreat into the self" summarises the loneliness and restless anxiety that characterises the negative consequences of individualisation (Whitley, 2008, p.354). Other consequence of the exponential freedom can affect the individual who might feel lost and "cast overboard" in the "high seas of postmodernity" (Whitley, 2008, p.354). Thereby, individual isolation and the decrease in communal networks have been labelled as risk factor that can develop negative effects on mental health, such as the rise in substance abuse, personality disorders, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, chronic stress, also including suicide as a psychiatric outcome.

Demographic changes reflect the transitional and compromising change for families as a previous modern foundational institution, towards postmodern increase in rates of divorce, lone parenthood and people living alone (Whitley, 2008, p.359). In terms of the intimate relationship, high expectations may be placed by individuals seeking for a space of certainty and predictability in the context of attenuated social structures and unpredictable changes of a post-

modern life (p.359). Nevertheless, Whitley (2008, p.359) argues how the one-to-one relationships, due to the intrinsic postmodern instability, may also result in anxiety and disappointment for the individuals.

Mental health

Mental or psychological health has been defined, by dominant medical models, as “the normal state of human functioning and can be defined as a condition in which the person is functioning well in their environment with a minimum of personal distress” (Nelson, 2009, p.348). Among the large number criticisms to the medical paradigm which has been dominant is many Western¹ countries, this thesis focuses on three main aspects. First, defining health as an absence of illness or problems seems to ignore the human strengths dimension. Secondly, because mental problems are difficult to identify and label, we cannot deny that there is a set of values or ideology behind the definition of what is “normal” or what is “illness” (Nelson, 2009, p.348). Indeed, “factual” descriptions or diagnoses are social constructs that may help the individuals or mislead the solution to a particular problem by “pathologizing essentially normal parts of life” (Lopez et al., 2006 in Nelson, 2009, p.348). Thirdly, Nelson (2009, p.349) argues how other dimensions of life such as religion and spirituality are overlooked in the medical approach to mental health and are criticised for being culturally insensitive.

Dissatisfaction towards this negative medical approach has led to broader and more positive conceptualisations of mental health, where health is regarded “as more than an absence of illness” (Nelson, 2009, p.352). The World Health Organization as an international institution has also shifted their perspective, situating mental health closely interwoven and deeply interdependent together with physical and social health as vital strands of life (WHO, 2001, p.3). It is generally agreed that mental health has a crucial role for the individual, social and country-level well-being, and that is “broader than a lack of mental disorders” (WHO, 2001, p.5).

Nevertheless, since mental health definition varies according to different cultures, the World Health Organization (2001) has recognised the challenge of defining, comprehensively, mental health from a cross-cultural perspective. Yet, it is argued the advance in the understanding

¹ This thesis addresses Western and non-Western terms following the literature as well as the data. This division does not intend to prioritise one perspective over the other. Instead, it attempts to build a cross-cultural discussion throughout the thesis considering diverse regional backgrounds and respecting different worldviews of research participants which guided this theoretical framework.

mental functioning through neuroscience and behavioral medicine and enabling “a more complete understanding of the development of mental and behavioural disorders” (WHO, 2001, p.5). For instance, when an individual fails to “cope adaptively to a stressful life event”, certain type of mental and behavioural disorders may occur, such as depression or anxiety (WHO, 2001, p.12). It has been largely recommended to disclose those problems with others, instead of individually dealing with stressors in life (WHO, 2001, p.13).

4.2 Positive models of mental health

Among the positive models of mental health, this section will review the hedonic approach and eudaimonic approach. The terms “subjective well-being” and “psychological well-being” will be connected, respectively, to each approach. Then, spiritual well-being will be discussed.

4.2.1 Hedonic approach and subjective well-being

The hedonic approach equates positive mental health with the individuals’ self-interested experiences of pleasure and happiness, avoiding as much as possible negative emotions (Nelson, 2009, p.352). The key term that reflects the hedonic approach towards mental health, is subjective well-being. Subjective well-being refers to individuals’ subjective cognitive appraisals of the quality of their lives (Christopher, 1999, p.143; Nelson, 2009, p.352-p.353) by evaluating their life satisfaction and seeking to determine “what is the good life” (Christopher, 1999, p.143).

Subjective well-being also consists of individuals’ evaluating the prevalence or imbalance of positive over negative affect in their lives (Diener, 1984. p. 543 in Christopher, 1999, p.143; Nelson, 2009, p.352-p.353). According to Christopher (1999, p.143), this subjective well-being’s stage is known as affective balance — also popularly known as the notion of happiness. Happiness is experienced, therefore, when individuals perceive more positive than negative feelings in their lives (Christopher, 1999, p.143). Hence, emotions have been related to subjective well-being, since they can significantly influence and affect individuals’ global values, priorities and behaviours (Nelson, 2009, p.354). It is argued that building more positive thoughts and behaviours may probably benefit physical health as well as longevity in people (Nelson, 2009, p.353).

4.2.2 Eudaimonic approach and psychological well-being

Differently to the hedonic approach, rather than considering mental health as an “end state of pleasure”, the eudaimonic approach applies broader terms such as psychological well-being to describe mental health as a dynamic process (Nelson, 2009, p.353). This perspective fits well in positive psychology school and European psychology as well. The field of positive psychology studies ordinary human strengths, virtues and conditions which lead to happiness, fulfilment, and flourishing (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216; 2005 in Linley et al., 2006). Positive psychology, thus, “hopes to develop a science that will maximise human happiness and potential, helping people to live well” (Nelson, 2009, p.353).

Generally, psychological well-being is defined by lives going well, through the combination of “feeling good” and “functioning effectively” outcomes (Huppert, 2009, p.137). Whereas “feeling good” includes positive emotions such as happiness contentment, interest, engagement and confidence; “functioning effectively” guides individuals to follow a sense of purpose towards the development of their own potential and building positive relationships (Huppert, 2009, p.138). Thus, psychological well-being is associated with an individual’s sense of coherence when developing a meaningful, manageable, and comprehensible life (Antonovsky, 1993 in Huppert & So, 2013, p.838). Huppert & So (2013) adds to this conceptual framework aspects such as vitality, emotional balance, resilience, and self-esteem (p. 137).

Psychological well-being is defined as a multidimensional and complex construct (Carmeli, Yitzhak-Halevy & Weisberg, 2009, p.66). Following clinical and development psychology theoretical perspectives, psychological well-being has been defined as a multi-dimensional model conformed by six dimensions of psychological well-being which are autonomy (or self-determination), environmental mastery (a sense of managing one’s life and the surrounding environment), personal growth (a sense of personal sustained development and growth), positive relationships (ability to create and maintain sustained and quality relations with other people), purpose in life (creating a meaningful life), and self-acceptance through a positive evaluation of the past and present of oneself (Ryff, 1989 in Huppert & So, 2013, p.838; Carmeli et al., 2009, p.68).

In terms of the individuals’ intentions that lead them towards psychological well-being, Huppert (2009, p.148) has reviewed three group of intentions. First, behaviours such as being kind in social relationships and doing sports. Second, applying positive and grateful cognitive appraisals when we interpret events that take place in life. Third, motivations enable us to move

towards our goals connected with our intrinsic values instead of pursuing external rewards (Huppert, 2009, p.148). However, this model has been criticised for offering “a shotgun approach to virtue with lists of strengths that are overly simplistic and have no common core or coherent idea about the nature of the good life” (Hackney, 2007 in Nelson, 2009, p.353).

Even though hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to positive mental health have been presented separately, Nelson (2009, p.353) has researched on the connections between subjective well-being and psychological well-being. For instance, some scholars have argued that subjective well-being could be a product of psychological well-being. Other researchers have defined flourishing as a condition free of mental health problems, where individuals present high levels of both subjective well-being and psychological well-being (Nelson, 2009, p.353). In terms of emotions, Huppert (2009, p.137) argues that reaching a sustainable well-being does not require people to “feel good all the time”. Instead, experiencing painful emotions is considered as a normal part of life and the essential aspect of sustainable well-being is to learn to cope with these negative emotions for long-term well-being. Nelson (2009) applies Buddhist thought to bear in mind another hedonic model’s limitation, since the “pursuit of positive emotions and avoidance of negative ones eventually affects our ability to see life in a realistic manner, leading to a variety of problems” (p.356). In this way, when adversity and negative emotions are ignored, the individual may overlook benefits and incentives for growth in life.

As for the eudaimonic approach, emotional intelligence has been related to four aspects of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and somatic complaints. Research suggests that highly emotionally intelligent individuals are more likely to experience higher levels of psychological well-being than individuals with lower emotional intelligence (Carmeli et al., 2009). Nevertheless, when negative emotions are extreme or last longer than what people can manage, psychological well-being can be compromised (Huppert, 2009, p.137). Research has shown that somatic complaints reflect unsuccessful coping with strain (Carmeli et al., 2009, p.68). Somatic complaints include physical and mental states such as sweating, headaches, insomnia, chest pains, fatigue, dizziness, stomach aches, and palpitations.

4.2.3 Religion and spiritual well-being

Spirituality is generally associated with a moral framework and the integral experience of individuals who follow their own inner truth, producing positive attitudes and relationships in a

meaningful life (Van Dierendonck, 2004, p.631; Kissman & Maurer, 2002, p.35). Van Dierendonck (2004, p.631) argues that these “inner resources give a feeling of strength in times of crisis, when dealing with the uncertainties of life”. According to Nelson (2009, p.347), intense interest has been given to the complex connections between mental health and religion or spirituality. Van Dierendonck (2004) claims that spiritual well-being can be included as a contributing factor in the model of positive psychological health (p.640). In this sense religion and mental health can be connected from different positive psychological approaches. First, the hedonic approach has found relation between religion and subjective well-being. Secondly, spirituality has also been connected to eudaimonic approach and psychological well-being. Thirdly, it is argued that religion produces different kind of well-being, which has been labelled as spiritual well-being (Nelson, 2009, p.359).

As mentioned before, the hedonic model has found positive connections with religion. Certain dimensions such as intrinsic religious motivation and individual beliefs have been related to subjective well-being, since they can potentially “generate positive feelings, participation in organised activities, and identification with a supportive community” (Nelson, 2009, p.354). Spirituality has also been related to subjective well-being because of the self-perceived personal growth of individuals, and for how the perceptions of the world affect more the meaning and coherence of a life than the actual circumstances (Nelson, 2009).

The eudaimonic model, or positive psychology understand religion as a source of virtues that can contribute to positive mental health, or as a “goal-directed activity or striving for the sacred than can have positive benefits” (Nelson, 2009, p.356). Lastly, Nelson (2009, p.359) argues how some scholars have proposed the model of spiritual well-being independent from psychological —hedonic or eudaimonic— approaches. Differently to psychosocial well-being and its goal-directed striving orientation, spiritual well-being has a relational focus that goes deeper, towards fundamental questions (Nelson, 2009, p.359). It contributes with integration, harmony, and freedom to the individual’s personality.

4.2.4 Buddhist mental balance model

Following the aim of this thesis of considering different cultural perspectives on psychological well-being, this section will review literature concerning Buddhist psychology and a model of mental balance based on Buddhist premises and positive psychology (Wallace & Shapiro,

2006). For over 2,500 years Buddhist tradition has cultivated exceptional states of psychological well-being, as well as helping to identify and treat psychological disorders (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Even though all Buddhist schools seek for spiritual liberation, enlightenment and equally as Western Psychology, they aim to reduce suffering, there are diverse and continuously evolving traditions coming from the historical Buddha 2500 years ago. Buddhism also promotes practices designed to enhance health (Nelson, 2009, p.338).

According to Buddhist thought, all people are subject to mental “disease, cravings, and delusions that lead to discontent, anxiety, and depression” (Nelson, 2009, p.338). Mental suffering is originated, in large part, due to the imbalances of the mind. On one hand, an unbalanced mind is linked with symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and frustration often catalyzed by social and environmental factors. On the other hand, and even in the face of adversity, a balanced mind is “relatively free of psychological distress” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.693). Buddhist theory argues that when people experience anxiety, frustration or misery, they tend to mistakenly find the sources of suffering in external objects, people or situations. Yet, Buddhist thought claims that the primary sources of mental suffering should be identified in internal mental afflictions such as delusion, craving or hostility (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.695).

Wallace and Shapiro (2006) refer to Buddhism theory rejection of hedonic perspective of mental health in which enjoyment is fulfilled temporarily by stimulus-driven pleasures. However, Buddhism does not deny the importance of stimulus-driven pleasures, like the joy of friendships, meaningful accomplishments in life or raising a family. The theory argues that a “life that is concerned with such pursuits alone does not give rise to lasting well-being” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.692). Buddhist practice argues that both external and internal pleasurable stimuli, are not permanent. In this sense, Buddhist practice aims to achieve a state of well-being which is not affected by the fluctuating nature of all phenomena. The path of seeking for happiness does not depend in grasping objective things and events to strengthen our unitary and independent ego. For instance, research has differentiated characteristics of people defined as “maximizers” and “satisfiers” (Schwartz et al., 2002, in Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.692). From one side, maximizers seek the best outcomes through external perfection, and at the same time they experience these outcomes as worse, increasing their own suffering. On the other side, satisfiers “are satisfied once the threshold of acceptability based on their intrinsic values is crossed” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.692). Wallace and Shapiro (2006, p.691) argue, according to Buddhist premises, that only when we start to misapprehend ourselves from the rest of

the world, we can identify the true causes of genuine well-being, through mental balance cultivation and experience wisdom and compassion (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.691). Furthermore, Buddhists argue that if we cultivate well-being, we gain more profound enjoyment from hedonic pleasures (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.692). Buddhist theory, therefore, seeks to build psychological methods to release suffering and cultivate a sustained well-being. Rather than a treatment, Buddhism fosters a new way of life based on a non-dualistic outlook towards reality, where spiritual and physical dimensions are intertwined. Furthermore, this new outlook is underpinned by self-aware behaviors and actions, and in deep and charitable connections with others (Nelson, 2009, p.339).

Researchers have aimed to build bridges between the Eastern-Buddhist theories with Western Psychology. Wallace & Shapiro (2006), and therefore this section, rely mostly on Theravada Buddhism originated in Southeast Asia, as well as Mahayana Buddhism of India and later from Tibet (p.691). Underpinned by the premise that the mind is in a state of imbalance and dissatisfaction “prior to any sensory or conceptual stimulation”, Wallace & Shapiro (2006, p.693) discuss an innovative model that is based on traditional Buddhist theory related with Western psychology, on how to cultivate and attain four types of mental well-being. Overall, the model attempts to “demonstrate how dialogue and empirical study can enrich both traditions” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.690).

According to Wallace and Shapiro (2006), four kinds of mental balance —conative, attentional, cognitive, and affective— are involved in major processes concerning the training of the mind as well as enhancing levels of health and well-being. Briefly described, conative balance can be associated with our intentions and desires. Attentional balance enables us to perform optimally in a meaningful activity. Cognitive balance is related to our state of being and engagement with the world of experience. Affective balance is associated with our emotional regulation skills. The model is underpinned by the premise that before any sensory or conceptual stimulation, the mind is in a state of imbalance and dissatisfaction (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.693).

The different types of mental balance are presented in a linear, but no strict way, so as to achieve a more effective mental balance. This is a dynamic, systemic, and interconnected model evolving towards well-being. Each component of the model functions distinctively, but together, they are part of a larger whole.

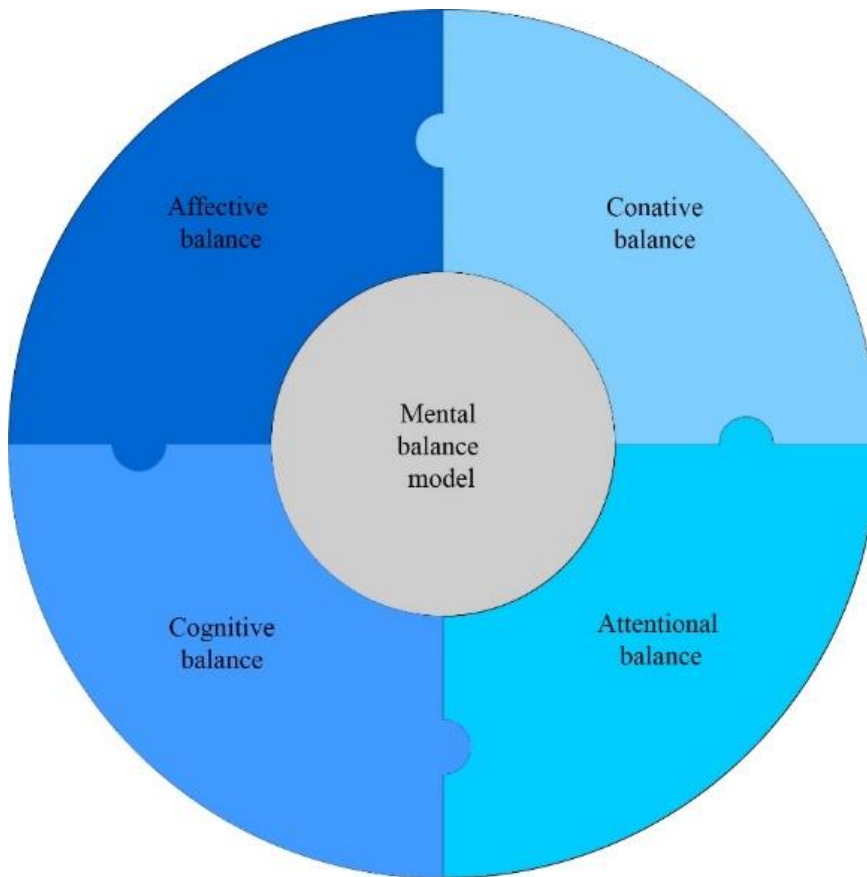


Figure 5. Mental balance model (based on Wallace and Shapiro, 2006)

One key aspect of the model is conative processes come first because they enable people to set intentions and priorities in order to cultivate mental well-being. In this sense, conative balance precedes and sets the course for the rest of the other three components of the model. Sustained attention is also necessary to achieve the next two final factors, because it enables people to examine their cognitive and affective states. Lastly, cognitive and affective balance “can most effectively be achieved on the basis of the prior cultivation of conative and attentional balance” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.693). It is important to bear in mind that when balance is achieved in one area, it influences the other three components of mental balance. Wallace & Shapiro (2006) provides more clarity to understand this interconnected system with the following example:

“as one gains greater affective balance, this is likely to result in greater wisdom regarding one’s choice of goals —conative balance—, increased ability to sustain attention —attentional balance—, and clearer mindfulness of events as they arise from moment to moment—cognitive balance—” (p.693).

Conative balance

In contrast to the common misconception that Buddhism does not support the ideal of having desires or goals in life, Buddhist conative balance is referred to conation, intention, and volition. Differently from an individual desire, intention implies a stronger commitment to set a range of aspirations that benefit not only the individual but also others' well-being (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.694). Examples of conation can be reflected in parents deciding to spend more time with their children, individuals developing healthier habits in life and/or contributing to a sustainable ecosphere, always accompanied with the actual decision to do so. In brief, a wholesome process which encompasses physical, verbal and mental behavior that is conducive "to one's own and others' well-being" (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.694). Long-term consequences of behavior need to be considered when we determine what is wholesome or unwholesome. Unwholesome can be reflected in an intention and decision that can help to gain well-being in the short-term, but in the long run it can raise psychological distress for the individual and for others. Tibetan medicine system of classification supports Wallace & Shapiro (2006) model, in this case, to examine several cases of unwholesome or imbalanced states of mind.

First, conative deficit is associated with a state of despair, disappointment and loss of imagination and motivation for happiness or being in a "better place". People can fall into such apathy when they have failed to fulfill a goal, such as receiving an offer to study at a chosen university or a professional field of work (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p. 694). On the other hand, conative hyperactivity is linked with people immersed in the fantasies about unfulfilled desires. Behaviors such as fixing obsessive goals (achieving excellent grades as students, or a person conquering romantically another person), consequently obscure the reality of what is happening here and now, in the present. Conative dysfunction is present "when people desire things that are detrimental to their own or others' well-being" (Gunaratana, 1985, p.29 in Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.694). Examples of addiction and other forms of substance abuse, or even a single-minded fixation obsession for pursuing financial success, may harm not only one's physical and psychological well-being, but also it may affect relations with others (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p. 694).

Conative balance implies the right and reflective intention to set meaningful desires. This altruistic devotion should be combined with a reflective process of evaluating what is conducive for the individual but also for the others well-being as well. Cultivating conative balance also means a loss in the interest for pursuing sensual pleasures, material gains, and social reputation.

Instead, conative balance is related to an increasing commitment to leading a meaningful life (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.695).

Attentional balance

According to Buddhist teachings, to perform optimally in a meaningful activity, it is necessary first to overcome attentional imbalances —attentional deficit, hyperactivity, and dysfunction (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.695). What is interesting is that human beings at large, are prone to attention deficit or hyperactivity disorders, not only people who are diagnosed with them. Buddhist theory characterises attention deficit as the “inability to focus vividly on a chosen object”, reflected for instance in students not listening to teachers’ instructions because of their restlessness and boredom (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.695). On the other hand, if students would have been daydreaming or distracted with their minds excessively aroused, they would have been dealing with attentional hyperactivity. Lastly when people concentrate on things that are not conducive neither to their own nor others’ well-being, Buddhist perspective would label this afflictive attentional process as dysfunctional (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.695).

In regards of current psychological theory, the significance of attention is corroborated with Buddha’s premises on sustained attention. Self-regulation theories discuss the central role of attention for maintaining, but also enhancing psychological functioning. Furthermore, sustained attention, together with cognitive control, help to guide thought, behavior, and decision making (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.696). For Buddhists, attention can be trained when we develop simultaneously “qualities of relaxation, attentional stability and vividness” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.696). The difference between Western Psychology studies is whereas the first links vivid attention with a high degree of effort, for Buddhist physical and mental relaxation come first. In this sense, attentional stability enables to develop attentional vividness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990 in Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.696). Meta-attention is a key concept for monitoring the state of our own minds, “swiftly recognizing whether one’s attention has succumbed to either excitation or laxity” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.695). In this way, Wallace & Shapiro (2006) summarise one of Buddhist practices for fostering attentional balance, focused on breathing and paying attention to body sensations: “while the attention is mindfully engaged with the respiration, one meta-cognitively monitors the meditative process” (p.695-696).

Cognitive Balance

Cognitive balance involves a state of being calm and engaged with the world of experience, avoiding imposing ideas or conceptual beliefs that may consequently misapprehend and distortion the course of events and reality. Wallace and Shapiro (2006) describe cognitive imbalance through the following example:

“A commonly cited example in Buddhism is mistaking a coiled rope for a snake. Because one does not initially perceive this object clearly (cognitive deficit), one is prone to projecting one’s fears or expectations on the object (cognitive hyperactivity), resulting in a misidentification of the object (cognitive dysfunction). In similar ways, people may mistake the emotions, attitudes, and intentions of other people because of a failure of clear attention, compounded by unconscious projections of their own hopes and fears” (p.696-697).

This quote reflects how people tend to experience cognitive imbalances when they are absent-minded —cognitive deficit—, or when they fail to separate perceived reality from their fantasies, immersed in their own assumptions and expectations— cognitive hyperactivity—, and lastly when people misapprehend events—cognitive dysfunction (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.696). Wallace and Shapiro (2006, p.697) discuss Buddhist thought regarding how the first challenge to cultivate cognitive balance starts with learning to develop an inner awareness, attending to one’s own mental processes and to what is presented to one’s senses. Therefore, overcoming cognitive imbalances requires application of mindfulness and meditative practice to the body, feelings, mental states and phenomena in general. Similarly, scientific research has also accompanied Buddhist theory in studying the therapeutic effects of mindfulness. Hence, different positive psychological outcomes have been found, arguing that the contribution of mindfulness to mental health is caused by how research participants learn to change the relationship with their own thoughts, through self-monitoring and awareness in the present moment” (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.698).

Affective balance

Affective balance is associated with developing emotional regulation skills, limiting excessive emotional vacillation or apathy (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.698). Even though this balance is the result of conative, attentional, and cognitive balance, affective imbalances may affect other facets of mental balance. Whereas affective deficit disorder can be reflected in acting with a cold indifference toward other people, affective dysfunction happens when people respond

with inappropriate emotions to different situations. Wallace and Shapiro (2006) continue to describe affective hyperactivity as a mental imbalance “characterised by excessive elation and depression, hope and fear, adulation and contempt, and infatuation and aversion” (p.698). Buddhism applies diverse and specific methods to treat these affective imbalances that together, can encourage individuals to develop a heartfelt yearning of valuing one’s own and others’ virtues and develop a sense of caring for others’ well-being (Wallace, 2004 in Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.698). Gratitude is another emotional quality that Buddhism promotes for enhancing affective balance.

4.3 Critical and cross-cultural awareness

The last sections of this chapter intend to build critical and cross-cultural awareness on the different terms addressed previously (subjective well-being, psychological well-being, counselling services). Furthermore, these sections will raise awareness of understanding mental health taking into consideration individualist and collectivist societies which surround the individual.

4.3.1 Individualistic vs. collectivist understanding of mental health

From a cross-cultural and critical standpoint, Christopher (1999) argues how individualistic presuppositions originated in Euro-American cultural roots inform two of the main approaches that study positive mental health: subjective well-being and Ryff’s (1989) theoretical conceptual framework of psychological well-being. First, subjective well-being places the individual responsibility of determining the standards by which to evaluate, subjectively, what means a good quality of life. Secondly, purpose of life, one of the central notions in Ryff’s (1989 in Christopher, 1999) model is defined by the individual’s clear sense of directedness and intentionality in her/his purpose and meaning to life. This notion, however, seems “tightly linked to individualism with its stress on human freedom” (p.147). In a similar way, the subscale of autonomy is embedded with values of individualism, in the sense that one’s thoughts and actions should be controlled only by the individual and not by external agencies or causes (Christopher, 1999, p.146).

Research has argued the complexity of defining mental health in terms of the influence of cultural differences (Christopher, 1999). Regarding the nature of the self, individualism identifies the person in an atomistic perspective, as separate from others. Society becomes a collection

of individuals who are expected to be self-defining and rational enough to define and pursue self-chosen objectives and interests (Christopher, 1999, p.142). Whereas autonomy is important for well-being in contexts that foster individualism, it is less relevant in collectivist societies (Huppert & So, 2013, p. 851). The division of well-being into a psychological and physical dimension —or mind/body dichotomy— is distinct for example in East Asia, where mental health is no different from physical health (Christopher, 1999, p.143). In more collectivist societies, good life is measured by the ability of living in harmony with others and not by the individual happiness (Christopher, 1999, p.144). Among the diverse Islamic views of the human person, to the reduction of the individual to dualistic models that concentrate on cognitive or biological aspects of the individual is generally rejected (Nelson, 2009, p.366). Instead, Islamic theory claims that each person encompasses four parts: the heart —*qalb*—, the intellect — ‘*aql*—, the spirit given by God, and the self. Nelson (2009) highlights the critical role of the heart in this model, as “ the essence of our spirit and the place where we meet God, a mirror which can be polished to reflect the Divine and the Names that disclose God’s attributes and actions” (p.366-367).

Regarding the view of emotions, Christopher (1999) highlights the fact that research has focused mostly on Euro-American two-dimension scale of emotions. The first dimension is defined by good/pleasant versus bad/unpleasant emotions, whereas the other dimension contrasts high energy versus low energy. Japanese culture adds a third dimension, which divides self-centered emotions from other-centered emotions, focusing on the social emotions. For instance, the emotion “*amae*” anticipates others indulgence in a hopeful approach, “*fureai*” involves the feeling of being connected to other, and “*tanomi*” derives from feeling we can rely on someone. In this sense, it is argued that there are other ways of building the self. Whereas individualist cultures prioritise the emotional life around the self, many collectivist cultures focus on an interpersonal or intersubjective emotion life, focusing on the others as well (Christopher, 1999, p. 144).

4.3.2 Fostering multicultural and critical counselling approaches

It is important to understand which health care systems and counselling services surround the individuals who may need assistance with mental health. In postmodernity, the individual may encounter a large and diverse number of counselling services. One of postmodern social dynamics change has been the expansion of health market and counselling services available

choices (Whitley, 2008, p.357). Kleinman (as cited in Whitley, 2008, p.357) address health care systems as a tripartite model. First, “popular” is represented by the self, family and friends; secondly “folk” refers to traditional or community healers; and lastly the “professional” sector includes medical staff. In postmodern times, research has shown that individuals have turned from popular sector to the professionals in order to deal with mental health challenges (Whitley, 2008, p.357). New and differentiated experts such as relationship counsellors, clinical psychologists, reiki healers, parenting teachers, astrologers are re-placing traditional sources of guidance. These consumer-clinician relationships have been labelled as contractual and commodified, where patients pay for attention (Whitley, 2008, p.357).

There are other arguments that criticise this approach. Whitley’s (2008, p.358) arguments are based on sociological perspectives to criticise the most common response of mental health services, which has been to provide medicalisation for treating less severe consultations. Expert knowledge in mental health has been criticised for being historically dominated by Western scientific logic (Hanharan, 2013, p.1153). Critical approach psychiatry claims that “mental health professionals only achieve their status through a narrative of ‘expertise’ in being the appropriate people to treat the problems of both mind (usually interpreted as the brain) and body” (Cohen, 2008, in Hanharan, 2013, p. 1152). It is criticised therefore the predominance of medical treatment and the lack of reflexivity in the field of psychiatry, achieving little regarding positive or long-term results for users. Instead, in order to self-cope with trauma, users should be encouraged to develop greater resiliency applying everyday resources. Other strategies imply developing community-based practices, based for example on a networked synthesis of the three Kleinman’s posited popular, folk, and professional sectors (Whitley, 2008). These innovative practices encourage individuals to participate actively in decision-making through connecting with others.

As discussed before, contemporary understandings of psychological well-being need to be placed in cross-cultural and historical contexts. This disclosure enables to understand how certain moral visions are frequently interpreted in specific ways according to the different contexts, shaping different definitions, understanding and application of psychological well-being in counselling services (Christopher, 1999, p.149). It is argued that critical conversations should be opened with clients, colleagues and the general public in counselling services. Consequently, “different components of our understanding of psychological well-being (like autonomy or happiness) cannot simply be transported to another culture without risk of serious

misrepresentation and misunderstanding” (Christopher, 1999, p.149). Christopher (1999) continues his argument with the proposal of a more dialogical approach, which enables an ongoing interpretive process (Christopher, 1999, p.150). This dialogue should also respect both moral visions from the clients as well as the counsellors. Hanrahan (2013) draws on Bob Pease (2002) critical social work theories and critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, questioning the modernist approaches in conventional practice to the notions of helping and empowerment. More dialogical forms of communication in the relationship between social workers and consumers have the potential of challenging “knowledge/ power connection of dominant discourses”, and therefore they can work together “in the construction of alternative forms of knowledge” (Pease, 2002, p. 142 in Hanrahan, 2013, p.1162). Hanrahan (2013, p.1162) refers to Paulo Freire’s co-intentional education and philosophy in which both subjects —education leaders and students— would critically dialogue, co-intent on reality and in this way could re-create that knowledge. This postmodernist praxis questions knowledge/power dominant discourses, and enables a collaborative understanding of empowerment which illuminate that: “the only worlds that people can know are the worlds we share in language, and language is an interactive process, not a passive receiving of pre-existing truths” (Freedman and Combs, 1996, p. 28 in Hanrahan, 2013, p. 1166). Furthermore, it is argued that this type of postmodern praxis can potentially challenge the “the modernist foundations of the Western medical model”, enabling to “relocate ourselves as experiencing beings in an ‘experienced world’” (De Montigny, 1995, p. 9 in Hanrahan, 2013, p. 1152).

5 Narrative Inquiry as the heart of the thesis

This chapter will introduce narrative inquiry as the research methodology of this thesis. The aim of this chapter, overall, is to understand narrative inquiry as the guiding heart of this study. First, ontological and epistemological commitments will be discussed. In order to approach the definition and justification of narrative inquiry as the methodological framework of this study, I will briefly review the history of narrative research and its lenses with psychology and identity. This chapter will also seek to identify central concepts and dimensions of narrative research approach.

5.1 Ontological and epistemological commitments as a relational research

“Their story, yours, mine —it's what we all carry with us on the trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them ” (Coles, 1989, p.30.)

It is necessary to clarify when and where this narrative inquiry journey began, from ontological and epistemological lenses. My curiosity and interrelation with international students' psychological well-being experiences at the University of Oulu can be compared with my first ontological standpoint, which led me to select narrative inquiry as the research methodology of this study (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013, p.575). Below, in my words, I quote a personal reflection of how the decision of approaching narrative research methodology started:

“I remember one of the summer sunny days at Oulu. I went for a walk with my Kummi tutor student. We sat on the beach, watching the sunset at the Kuivasjärvi lake. The peace and silence would always guarantee a safe space where we would discuss our personal issues, our inspirations as well as academic concerns. In one of these conversations, I was sharing my deep curiosity in understanding, as well as helping other international students going through psychological well-being challenges. However, I was concerned on which research methodology would suit best for this research project. My Kummi friend simply suggested me the key word: Narrative...and that's how my connections with students began....At the same time, I was aware, even at that stage and even now and for future implications- that psychological well-being stories would be a sensitive topic, and for that reason, I felt that ethical matters would have to be prioritised in this thesis”.

In this sense, responsibility and obligations towards the research participants sharing their stories are part of the researcher's ontological commitment. Being aware that the researcher's ontological standpoint will shape every stage of the narrative inquiry, in order to engage deeply

with experience, Caine et al.(2013) highlight that narrative inquirers need a relational commitment, defining it as “a commitment to a form of togetherness in research that seeks to explore how we are living in the midst of our stories” (p.576).

From this ontological perspective, experience is associated epistemologically as knowledge for living (Caine et al., 2013, p.576). Similarly to the constructivist paradigm a narrative research paradigm understands the world and ourselves by way of subjective and interpretative processes which are culturally rooted, and “the borders between ontology and epistemology become blurred: reality is shaped largely by the way in which we perceive it, know it, interpret it and respond to it” (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p.212). In this sense, taking into consideration the temporality of knowledge generation and that experience is always more than what it represents and what we know (Clandinin, 2016), it is necessary to recognise that the knowledge that emerges from the interpretation of stories is only provisional. Considering participants subsequent life experiences and the researcher’s access to new theoretical insights, stories would be interpreted differently in another future point of time, even this current day.

Furthermore, according to Spector-Mersel (2010, p.212) there are three circumstances that characterise narrative epistemology. First, stories are told from the narrator’s current situation, either stories are situated in the past or the future. Second, every narrative representation implicates a selective emphasis of our experience (Clandinin, 2016, p.15), through conscious and unconscious processes that involve selecting experiences among a variety of possibilities within our life history (Rosenthal, 2004 in Spector-Mersel, 2010, p.212). Third, there are three spheres of context that conform and underpin these narratives, composed by the intersubjective relationships, the collective social field and the cultural meta-narratives where these stories are produced and where they evolve. Hence, our stories are not entirely free or exclusive creations from our contexts, “we are only their ‘co-authors’” (Ruth & Kenyon, 1996 in Spector-Mersel, 2010, p.212). As Clandinin (2016, p.21) argues, narrative inquiry led me as an inquirer to think about identities in a relational way. As Clandinin (2016) argues, I understand that my thinking “grows out of being-in-relation” (p.580), or relational knowing.

Below, I will continue discussing the brief history of narrative research, seeking as well to find connections between narrative research and identity from psychological lenses. Also, I will present which are the key dimensions that underpin this narrative research study.

5.2 Brief history of narrative research, psychological lenses and narrative dimensions

Since 19th century, major disciplines such as anthropology and sociology have employed narratives to study human reality (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p.207). However, when the positivist paradigm became dominant, biographical and narrative methods became marginalised, particularly after World War II. Spector-Mersel (2010, p.207) argues that the renewed interest in more interpretative methods would occur only after the 1970's, when quantitative methods turned to be disappointing to appreciate human experience. Narrative was rediscovered as an alternative method of inquiry which enabled to examine ordinary people's oral narratives of everyday experience, especially those of silenced voices (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p.207).

During the 1980s, an increase of ground-breaking publications related to narrative questions, methods and phenomena reflected how a *narrative turn* penetrated most social science disciplines, professions and the media (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.329, Spector-Mersel, 2010, p.207). This turn renewed not only narrative methods but also its previous "factist" premises, since narrative had been thought "to reflect an objectified essence, located either within the narrator or outside him"(Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 207). Instead, the new constructivist—termed as discursive and postmodern—approach focused on a subjective and relativist reality considering the relationship between the narrative and the phenomenon that it appears to be reflecting. In Spector-Mersel (2010) words, "narratives do not mirror that seeming entity but construct it" (p. 208).

The value of stories, in all aspects of life is emphasised by narrative (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Life experiences told through stories help people to understand and reflect on their personal and other individuals' way of thinking, acting, and reacting. Social, cultural, political, and linguistic narratives are embedded with these stories, within the phenomenon of experience itself (Clandinin, Caine & Lessard, 2018). Moreover, challenging, and disrupting events such as going to the doctor or illness can be described and resolved through "personal experience narratives" (Labov, 1972 in Stephens, 2011, p.64).

Cristine Stephens (2011) argues that narrative psychology is based on the narrative analysis of individual and everyday life stories. The narrator can reflect on illness or disruptive events, describing what sort of self they were, explaining their behaviors and the meanings of those difficulties. When shaping and explaining these actions and from a social psychological standpoint, personal stories are interpreted "within a life situation and life history which includes work, interests and relationships" (Stephens, 2011, p.64). Thus, narrators actively seek to

achieve an identity where a sense of self may be changed and adapted to different life circumstances. Causes of problems and illness can be applied as reference points to explain, and to reconstruct, “their changing relationship with the world” (Stephens, 2011, p.64). Interestingly, when people define who they are to others through stories, Stephens (2011,p.65) argues that rather than sharing the “essential” self, individuals might share a myriad of different identities appropriate to the social context of the telling. In this way, narrative inquiry can approach and understand identity following this approach:

“identity is a storied life composition, a story to live by. Stories to live by are shaped in places and lived in places. They live in actions, in relationships with others, in language, including silences, in gaps and vacancies, in continuities and discontinuities” (Clandinin & Huber, 2002, p. 161–162 in Young & Joe, 2012, p.16).

In this sense, when analysing identity within a story, narrative inquiry works from different dimensions, such as places where the stories are lived, the interactions with others and the importance of temporality when considering continuities or discontinuities. Below, I will review key terms and dimensions that underpin and guide a narrative inquiry, and therefore, this study.

John Dewey’s notion of experience is considered by narrative researchers as the key philosophical underpinning of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 in Lessard, Caine, & Clandinin, 2018, p.4). There are two criteria proposed by Dewey— “*interaction* and *continuity* enacted in situations”—which underpin the narrative understanding of experience (Lessard et al., 2018, p.4). Interaction and continuity have been connected to three key dimensions or commonplaces by Clandinin and Connelly (2000, in Lessard et al., 2018, p.4). These commonplaces, or dimensions are identified as *sociality*, *temporality* and *place* (Clandinin, Pushor & Orr, 2007, Lessard et al., 2018, p.4).

The dimension of sociality is originated in Dewey’s criterion of interaction, stating that a person is “always in interaction with his/her world attending to both personal and social conditions (Lessard et al., 2018, p.4). Personal conditions have been defined as “the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” of the inquirer and participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.480 in Lessard et al., 2018, p.4). Social conditions refer outward, to the milieu, the conditions within which people’s experiences and events are unfolding (Lessard et al., 2018, p.4). In this sense, there is, simultaneously, a relational aspect of narrative inquiry

which aims to understand and interpret the connections between the personal stories and public concerns (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010).

The dimension of temporality is associated with the second criterion of experience, continuity. Lessard et al. (2018, p.4) highlight that this notion “draws attention to ways in which the past, present, and future of people, places, things, and events are interrelated, that is always in temporal transition, always on the way, in the making”. In this sense, wherever individuals position themselves, whether in an imagined now, past or future, each point grows out of other previous experience and leads to an experiential future.

The dimension of temporality is lined as well to a third dimension, place (Lessard, et al., 2018, p.4). Place is defined as “the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (Connelly & Clandinin 2006, p.481 in Lessard et al., 2018, p.4). This is connected to narrative researchers’ tasks to look into storytellers’ landscapes and pay attention to specific situations (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.339).

5.3 More than a research methodology: narrative inquiry

“Narrative inquiry, the study of experience understood narratively, means much more than telling stories, much more than living stories” (Lessard et al., 2018, p.4).

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology of research (Trahar, 2009) that seeks to understand and inquire into experience, through the “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). In other words, narrative inquiry is largely understood as “people in relation studying people in relation” (Clandinin, 2016, p.23). Next, I will explain how this study approaches narrative inquiry as a broader term than a research methodology.

Grounded in interpretative hermeneutics and phenomenology (Trahar, 2009), narrative inquiry “is both the phenomenon and the methodology for its study”, and an orientation to “how we understand human experience” (Clandinin, 2016, p.216). In this sense, inquiry by its own, acts as a negotiated research practice which seeks to understand “puzzles around people’s experience” (Caine et al., 2013, p.576). Stories have a central place in our existence (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p.211). Thereby, the phenomenon of experience is viewed as fundamentally narrative (Clandinin, 2016, p.217), and it is actually through the experience that individuals’ lives are

composed and continuously re-composed in relation with other “storied lives” (Caine et al., 2013, p.576).

Caine et al. (2013) argue that when we understand narrative inquiry beyond a research methodology, we understand experience as lived in the midst, and beyond the lens of the researcher. This allows to see experience as “always unfolding over time, in diverse social contexts and in place, and as co-composed in relation” (p.575). Narrative inquirers are committed to attend and inquire into experiences “through the living and telling of stories”, as “lived and told” (Les-sard et al., 2018, p.4). Story can be viewed as a portal through which the person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.375). The role of stories is to offer insights into experiences, showing connections within people (Caine et al., 2013, p.583). Hence, understanding that we live our lives in “storied landscapes” (Clandinin, 2016), necessarily led us to take into consideration relational aspects of being and knowing, and “sensitivity to the nested and overlapping stories that bring people together in research relationships”(Caine et al., 2013, p.584).

Research from a cultural perspective has shown how participants would develop their stories of illness from “public narratives” (Somers, 1994 in Stephens, 2011, p.67). These culturally shared stories between family members, institutions or states, would shape the personal stories of group members, and represent how people would respond to particular illnesses and their mind-body relationships (Garro, 1994 in Stephens, 2011, p.67) . In a broader perspective, moral identities or subject positions of storytellers and those in their cultural-social networks are part of broader narratives, also known as meta or master narratives (Somers, 1994 in Stephens, 2011, p.67). It is argued that these popular socially available narratives of progress, human rights or freedom “are created within societies, shared, and used unconsciously to provide locations for personal stories “(Somers, 1994 in Stephens, 2011, p. 68).

Stories can accommodate or resist and transcend the dominant meta-narratives (Stephens, 2011, p.69). A post-structuralist and discourse analysis perspective highlights the reflexive nature of storytelling, showing how story telling is opposed to static meta-narratives as individuals have more than one identity which is always in a state of flux. The dynamic nature of these identities is the reason why it rejects “fixed master narratives” (Langellier & Peterson, 2004 in Stephens, 2011, p.69).

Hence, narrative inquiry is therefore known as a flexible and accessible approach to understand health and inequalities in health (Stephens, 2011). Moreover, I have selected narrative approach because it provides a voice for educators and students, who work collaboratively with researchers (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Young and Joe (2012) summarise clearly my argument:

“It is from within these shifting, uncertain, and often uneasy spaces shaped in this meeting and, at times, collisions of storied lives, in this meeting, for example, of individual’s stories with the dominant social, cultural, linguistic, and institutional narratives which shape schools and universities”(p.32).

Finally, O' Grady, Clandinin & O' Toole (2018) explore different narrative research projects that have questioned meta-narratives which have dominated in social/educational contexts, proposing and enabling silenced knowledge to be communicated. In this sense, it is argued that educational research can be enhanced by the contribution of “reflective, creative and emancipatory possibilities” of narrative inquiry (O' Grady et al., 2018, p.155).

5.3.1 The research participants, narrative interviews and interpretative poetics

During October of 2019, I sent an online questionnaire for international students with the support of the Student Union and IT Administration services of the University of Oulu. The first purpose of this questionnaire was to collect data for my first research report regarding psychological well-being services of the University of Oulu (OYY, 2019). The second purpose was to call participants for this study. Then, at different times between mid-October and the end of November 2019, eight research participants voluntarily contacted me via e-mail or personally.

Even though narrative inquiry does not favor any particular method of gathering data (Trahar, 2009), I found that open-ended and participant-led interviews would allow me to collect the stories or field texts (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, p. 332) of this thesis, adding the same importance to feelings, hunches and conversations in the non-formal spaces such as corridors of the University (Trahar, 2009), or even a simple walk. Before each interview, there was a preparation stage. First, participants reached me after they had answered the questionnaire “Support Mental Well-being Services for International Students” (previously discussed in Chapter 2), where I had invited international students to participate in this thesis through this statement:

Would you like to participate in a Master's thesis research concerning mental well-being of international Students? if so, please contact (researcher's student e-mail contact).

Participants and I would communicate via e-mail. After agreeing on a day and time for the interview, held in my temporal office at the OYY, I sent students the following questions as a guide for the interview:

Can you draw a timeline depicting events that were important in your student path through University of Oulu? (This is optional and depends more on the participants, only if you find it helpful you can do it before the interview or take some minutes in the beginning of the interview)

Can you identify positive moments related to your mental well-being?

What about challenging moments in relation to your mental well-being?

Can you identify who/which were the support people services/ strategies that helped you overcome these challenging situations?

I also invited the participants to freely draw a timeline of their experiences, identifying these positive or challenging moments throughout their studies. Even though these pre-set requirements helped to guide the interviews, they did not determine the flow of the interview session unless the participants would ask for it.

The interview sessions were held face-to-face, in a quiet room at the OYY. In each session, I would begin the interview explaining the personal reasons for doing this thesis, starting a dialogue where I would follow the participants' topic of conversation. I also introduced them the consent form so as to formally guarantee their anonymity and presenting the general purpose of narrative inquiry as the methodology: to listen to their stories.

The letter of consent described the thesis as a 'research project', since it has been embedded with the research internship that I carried out in Autumn 2019 at the OYY. The consent form explained the methodology and aims of the research, informing participants of the confidentiality, anonymity, and the possibility of freely withdrawing from this research at any stage (see appendix 1). All of them signed and agreed to participate in this thesis before the start of the interview.

It was interesting to notice that, same as myself, research participants were international students from outside of European Union countries. Students belonged to diverse faculties and programs of the University of Oulu, which was an asset for me as a researcher so as to count

with diverse views and experiences. For the purpose of respecting students' anonymity, I will not describe personal characteristics, or master program that students belonged to, only faculties that have been named. I do not address specifically their time living in Finland, but only those who were first year students. Master studies from faculties of Architecture, Business School, ICT (Information and communications technology), Education and Engineering were represented by the eight participants. Six of the participants were female, and two were male. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for their stories. I have blurred all the students' personal information in the three drawings that have been attached to this thesis (see appendices 2,3,4). Nonetheless, it is important to mention that all the pseudonyms chosen to have a personal meaning of how I perceived their stories, and all participants have kindly agreed on their pseudonyms.

During the interview sessions, my personal aim was to create a safe space where trust would guide the dialogue and conversation with the participants. My purpose was that participants could feel relaxed and open for sharing their story. As for me, acknowledging that listening to psychological well-being stories was an uncertain route and a personal challenge, I found *interpretative poetics* as a suitable method to apply during the interview sessions. Underpinned by Psychoanalysis, interpretative poetics enabled me, throughout the interview sessions, to illuminate the experience of the unconscious, focusing on language, negativity, the silences in speech and the *unsayable* (Rogers, 2007, p.109). Even though the field texts—research participants' stories data— will not be analysed through psychoanalytic lens, interpretative poetics helped to locate myself, and reflect on my questions in the following way:

“Thus the questions are formed by the researcher in relation to how I read the subject addressing me, listening for the limits of what can be said consciously and responding in both conscious and unconscious aspects of language” (Rogers, 2007, p.109).

Therefore, to inform myself during the interviewing time, I drew on story threads and language of the unsayable as two of the interpretative layers. The *story threads* layer illuminated how the process of narrating is intrinsically connected with knitting stories, stories that are told to communicate through spoken language. On the other hand, the layer of *language of the unsayable* made me aware that beyond speaking, communication involves negations, revisions, and silences which need to be heard (Rogers, 2007, p.109).

In this sense, during the interviews I tried to listen actively and carefully respecting the moments of silence in the stories. Certain highlights of the participants' stories could be later

recovered, only in the last part of the interview, but I would not interrupt their experiences. Only when participants would require so, I would follow the list of questions of positive, challenging moments and coping strategies and support they found at the University.

5.3.2 Data analysis: Three-Dimensional Space approach and creative analytic practice

Three-Dimensional Space approach

In narrative inquiry, the stories collected by interviews or informal conversations are called field texts as well (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 in Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). These stories represent the data which is analysed by the researcher so as to “re-story the story” based on diverse narrative elements (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.332). The two research puzzles of this study were first approached from a three-dimensional space data-analysis approach. This holistic data analysis method is based on Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and explained by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002, p.339). As discussed previously (see “narrative dimensions” in section 5.2 of this chapter), narrative inquiry understanding of experience leads researchers to work from the conceptualisation of three dimensions or commonplaces: interactions, continuity and places —also labelled as sociality, temporality and situations (Lessard et al., 2018, p.4, Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.339).

For the data analysis process, the analysis of individual experiences considers the individual interactions within themselves and with others, considering the continuity of time and different contexts. In this sense, I was attentive to “specific situations in the storyteller’s landscape”, involving “the physical places or the sequence of the storyteller’s places” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.339).

The figure below portrays the holistic data analysis process that I carried out through reading and re-reading the transcripts or field notes of the interviews (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). It is important to highlight that this three-dimensional space approach became, not only the primary means for analysing the data, but also to think about the data.

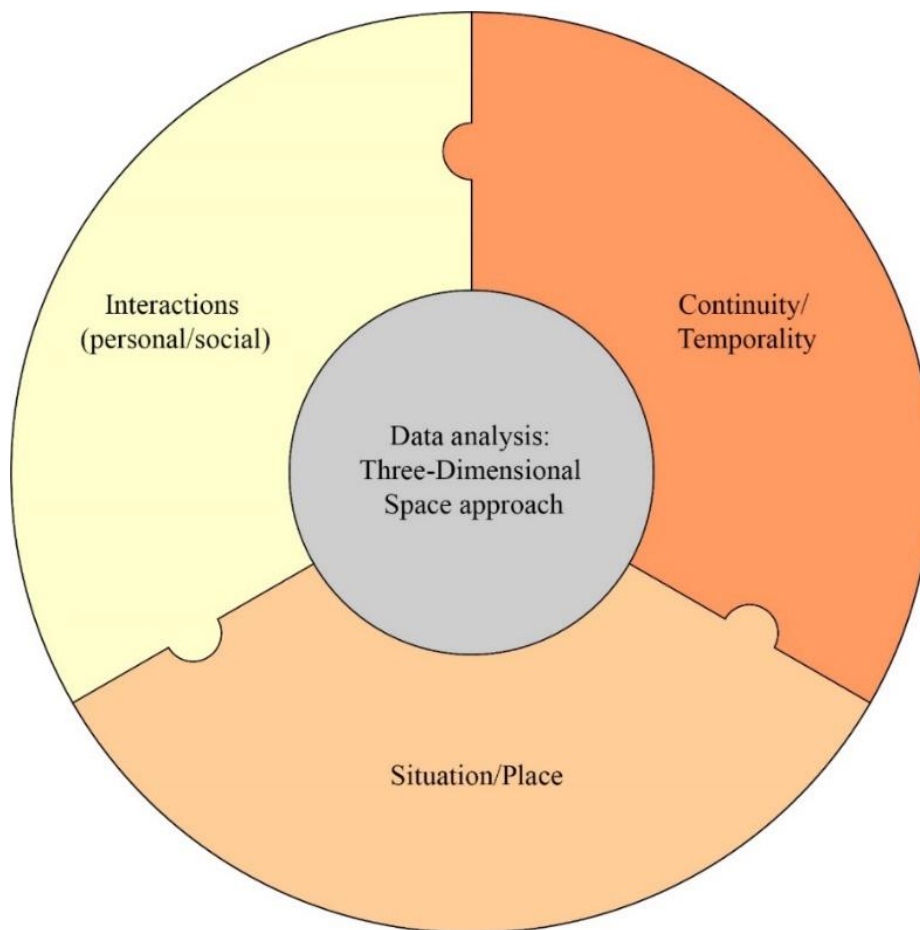


Figure 6. The Three-Dimensional Space Narrative structure (Adapted from Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 in Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.340)

When looking into the different but interrelated aspects of this narrative approach, I focused first on participants interactions within themselves—in terms of psychological well-being—and with others, connecting to social actors such as psychological well-being support services of the University of Oulu as well. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) suggest researchers to analyse as well the “different intentions, purposes, and points of view on the topic of the story” of the people whom the storytellers interact with (p.339). Then, I concentrated on the past experiences, their present experiences feelings at the time of the interview and expectations about future. It was interesting to understand temporality in terms of seasons—such as winter, spring and summer—which would be related to the first dimension of personal interactions within students experience on psychological well-being. At this stage, I was looking into storytellers’ landscapes and different situations, such as experiences lived after a sequence of places. Connecting this dimension with the previous two dimensions, I was aware on how these places involved interactions to pay attention to, as well as the diversity of temporal dimensions.

Therefore, data analysis was a complex process. Reading and re-reading, I also applied my ontological and relational commitment as a narrative inquirer. In this sense, it was difficult to separate myself from the students' stories. I started to reflect on the commonalities and differences between their stories, and then I returned to understand their individual mark on each story. I paid attention to the "inward" side of their stories in terms of psychological well-being and to the "outward" side, referring to "existential conditions in the environment, in terms of other individuals' actions, reactions, intentions, purposes, and assumptions" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 in Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.342). I wrote the first interim texts regarding research participants lived experiences and submitted them to the research participants, understanding the retelling process and a collaborative commitment with them (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.342). It was at this stage where I felt in relation with participants' stories. I found myself immersed and connected with themes, tensions and different patterns. As Young and Joe (2012, p.47) argue, "tensions that arise in the negotiation of all phases of the inquiry, including within the co-composition of field, interim, and research texts".

Creative analytic practice

At the final stage, after thinking and rethinking how to present the findings in a respectful approach towards participants, both research puzzles have been "restored" from creative analytic research practice. Creative analytic practices, or simply CAP are represented by "different and alterative kinds of research practices that are both creative and analytic" (Richardson, 2000 in Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p.285). Thereby, as a storyteller I aimed to bring together a kind of tale that would reflect both the hows (the process) and whats (the product) of narrative. I found that addressing research participants' stories separately as a product would be limited in terms of what a relational narrative inquiry means. And that the thesis needed to reflect the process, talking back to international students' community, particularly honoring the research participants of the study. Among the umbrella of different kinds of creative analytic practices, such as fictional or poetic representations, music, photographs, and drawings (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p.285), I found myself with two research decisions. First, I have divided the findings in two stages: "Their story" (see Chapter 1) and "Our story" (see chapter 6). Secondly, I have been encouraged to change the structure of a traditional thesis in placing "Their Story" findings in the introduction of the thesis. Thirdly, I wrote "Our story" in a form of a letter, prioritising a relational dialogue addressed to the international students.

Their story

In the introduction of this thesis, *Their Story* section has introduced a holistic analysis of research participants' stories, seeking to introduce findings related to the first research puzzle regarding how postgraduate international students talked about their psychological well-being experience at the University of Oulu. This part is placed at the beginning of the thesis because I want to highlight three aspects of this study. One, is that I intend to provide "a first place" to research participants in this study by presenting their stories in the introduction. Secondly, this structure supports the researcher's process or journey of dialoguing, back and forth, between theory and data. Thirdly, the theoretical framework of this study is broad and complex, and I expect that reading first the stories might guide readers in the understanding of the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Our story

The second findings section is represented in a letter, addressed to the research participants and international students' community. The letter has a format of a dialogue, going back and forth between students' stories and my story. I find this writing approach as the means to share postgraduate international students' stories' findings in a coherent and related way. Additionally, my aim is that this chapter can be accessible for all the international community of students. Finally, the purpose of "Our story" is to "complete" the process of addressing the first research puzzle and focusing as well on the second research puzzle of this thesis. This standpoint enables me to express personal interpretations of the stories as a student, but mostly as a researcher, enabling me to protect participants' anonymity. In other words, my aim is that the dialogue between the student participants and myself can be understood as a "natural" story that can represent the key findings of this thesis. There are some limitations, though. I have named some participants more than others, but only for the sake of focusing on the main findings of the second research puzzle. Overall, all the stories are interwoven by story threads.

6 Our story

Dear international students,

To begin with, I would like to thank you again for sharing your stories with me. I will start with some general reflections regarding your stories, then focus on the challenges that you dealt with psychological well-being support services. In the end of this letter, I will present some of your ideas, based on your experiences, regarding how to improve international students' psychological well-being services at the University of Oulu.

First, it seems that most of you expressed your thoughts, your feelings and experiences about the moment of arrival to Finland, or even you went back to pre-arrival experiences. Sangmu and Nesrine, you expressed how coming to Oulu was a dream that had come true. For Sangmu, the experience was more related to an identity quest and your passion for European culture. For Nesrine, it was more about studying abroad and integrating to the Finnish society. You also shared how relieved you felt when you found information on mental health services at University's website before coming to Finland. Purnima, you expressed your double feeling of excitement and worry about what would come next, highlighting the fact of having previous diagnosis in terms of psychological well-being. Rohan and Aliya, as first year students, you helped me to understand pre-arrival experiences concerned with your psyche and your previous influences that have an impact on your present student life. Alan, you informed me about the importance of previous experiences with psychological well-being services in other countries when studying double-degree programmes. Lien and Mai, you shared the importance of considering past experiences and challenges experienced within internships and study exchanges abroad. Also, Rohan and Lien, you taught me about the reasons that "pushed" you and encouraged you to come to Finland as a developed country. Rohan, I hope I have been helpful as the first point of contact to provide you with information regarding psychological well-being support services at the University. Overall, despite the difficulties which I will now present, most of you expressed how challenging experiences with psychological well-being become a learning experience of personal growth, with expectations about a better future, which reminds me of my story as well.

I have to be honest, how difficult it was to separate your stories from mine when you described those moments when, as Alan said, "everything comes together". Purnima, you mentioned as

a process where “*things become really difficult*” and you “*just got cut off by surprise somehow*”. Sangmu identified those moments “*a terrible situation*”, saying that:

“I never think like my decision to quit the job and stayed at home and constantly moving like all of these things affected me that much...yes, so February I was diagnosed with depression and at that moment I still didn’t write anything about my thesis so it’s just I don’t know how to say but I feel everything in my life is just so mess like I don’t write my thesis and I have to find a new apartment soon (...) because of the thesis I cannot find a job as well I have to wait when I complete my thesis and then it is, a terrible situation terrible situation, yeah...”

So, how did we end up experiencing all those challenging moments? When did they start or what situations triggered them? According to my understanding of our interviews, there were certain seasons and situations which would potentially trigger, or not, feelings of overstress, depression, sadness, anxiety, fears, heaviness, derealisation, panic, procrastination, frustration or disappointment. Some of us would notice these changes by physical symptoms (somatic complaints) and, or, changes in our behavior...Maybe our hands could tremble in the middle of a lecture. Perhaps our eating order and sleeping habits would be affected.

Some of us reflected on how these psychological well-being challenges would be interrelated with academic issues, such as procrastinating deadlines, or lack of motivation for thesis or even quitting the whole degree program, affecting sports assistance or motivation to participate in sporting activities. Also, again, I might be wrong, but if we had to generally identify those triggering seasons, feelings and situations, including characteristics and particular experiences of each of us, here I summarise a list of what you shared with me. Most of you talked about winter and darkness or beginning of spring as a challenging transition moment. Loneliness was also named as a challenge connected with feelings of anxiety or depression. Some of you talked about lasting negative effects of past intimate relationships, or childhood and/or family traumas. Some of you identified challenges in studies and your psychological well-being connected with constant perfectionism. Some of you talked about the initial cultural shock (adaptation) in Finland and pedagogical adaptation in the study program. Two of you expressed, differently, some cultural identity challenges. Some of you perceived a gap of knowledge with your classmates or integration difficulties with Finnish society and classmates. One of you talked about accommodation concerns and relationships with flatmates had affected your studying and work routine, and your emotions as well. Two of you shared the concern for accomplishing credits for renewing international student scholarship had also affected your psychological well-being.

Some of you highlighted the lack of interest/disappointment with the Master program and perception of lack of support for thesis. One of you perceived a competitive and non-collaborative program/class environment. One of you mentioned the stress experienced when waiting for internship/work confirmation. One of you combined work with study schedules, affecting your sleeping pattern. Most of you experienced different experiences of frustration or misunderstandings with psychological well-being support services and the University which this letter will address more in detail later.

In these difficult times, it seems that we all have taken different approaches and strategies in order to prevent, cope and overcome challenging situations. We cannot generalise these actions but they are worth to summarise: joining student interest groups and/or volunteering in local-international events; joining University Kummi-student tutoring-family programs; talking with close friends or family, no matter the context; seeking for counselling services, either study psychologists or Finnish Student Health Services professionals; seeking health assurance professional help from work/international student health assurance; trying new interest-based internships; practising sports/dance/physical activities; religion; self-positive dialogue and self-motivation; reading self-help books; meditation; assuring company from own pet; moving out from a toxic environment accommodation; traveling back home; changing study routines (new spaces/colleagues where and whom to study with); art, cooking, dancing and musical activities; sharing pleasant activities (cooking for example) with others; developing self-awareness in learning from previous mistakes; taking prescribed medicine from psychiatrists/doctors; acknowledging certain specific diagnosis in order to justify challenging student academic performance and renew scholarship.

Now it is time to address, with more insightfulness, those moments when you asked for information and/or sought for help in different psychological well-being support services.

Purnima, you highlighted the importance of the first contact with support representatives, such as Kummi tutor students. You remembered how your experience with Kummi tutor students before coming to the University had actually demotivated you to seek for help:

“I did not get sort of a direct answer of my Kummis also... about the mental health services here on Campus here if they’re in English or not, if they are good or not... So that was what put me off”.

Even after your negative experience with Kummi tutor students, you seemed not to find visible information regarding psychological well-being support services. Then, when reading about Finnish Student Health Services psychology or counselling structures and working methodology, you shared how you had found their website and working approach “*very intimidating*”. You claimed “*why would I rely on that nurse?*”, and then explained thoroughly your uncomfortable thoughts regarding the idea of sharing your personal issues first with a nurse, and that the nurse would decide whether you should visit next a psychologist or a psychiatrist, even if you felt certain that you needed a psychologist. You also mentioned your thoughts regarding the possible outcome of explaining psychological well-being concerns to a Finnish person:

“I sound very judgmental here(...) I don’t know if it would take a lot of effort on my side to explain what I’m going through and then waiting for the person to process and then advise me something that”.

But you acknowledged how a personal concern could affect the communication with the nurse:

“I don’t know how I would articulate, also I didn’t want to freak out in front of the nurse randomly, because when I am anxious my hands start to tremble and my voice...”.

And also, you clarified how different you perceived physical from mental health, so it would not have been the same to receive some prescribed pills from actually what you really needed, to “*sit and talk to people*”. You continued the story:

“But then, again, it’s not that the option was not there...it was there but I didn’t feel empowered to go and pursue it which is why I feel maybe in the student body we can have representatives who can really guide us through the structure and make us feel comfortable and battle these things out”.

Nesrine, in your story you explained certain reasons that would “*stop*” you from seeking for psychological well-being professional help. First, you clarified that in your society of origin mental health services are not popular because your culture deals with these situations with religion and a spiritual connection with God. Another reason to add, indeed, is the fact that you claimed never having an issue before during your childhood, and you had always tried to “*figure out everything*” by yourself. Then, you also described the moment when one of your friends in Finland had got an appointment with psychological well-being support services late, so you thought the same would happen to you.

Thus, when you asked for an appointment with a study psychologist in the end of May, because of vacations, you received an answer in August. Furthermore, you were critical of your experience with the study psychologist suggestions regarding studying techniques. You claimed that these techniques were easy to find on Google, like setting a timer, or working every 45 minutes. The next month, you were not feeling motivated to meet the study psychologist again, so you preferred telling the professional that *“everything was fine”*.

I now remember Alan, when you shared your experience of looking for information regarding psychology at the University, you found a website where *“everything was in Finnish”*. What caught your attention was that probably *“someone who worked for this area never thought about international students”*. You shared how *“somehow”*, after sending the e-mail, you forgot about this request. After a couple of weeks, when the appointment with the study psychologist was settled, you recognised how you approached the appointment from a task and behavioral oriented perspective, discussing feelings of being stuck and anxious about thesis —described as *“things on the surface”*. In this sense, you seemed to be self-aware that the result had not been very helpful, since you received only task-oriented suggestions from the study psychologist.

Sangmu, you shared your thoughts when the study consultant that had been assisting you, quit the position. Although the consultant suggested you contacting another colleague, you did not feel comfortable with that decision because:

“I feel that it always works like that, I have the consultation with them and I get motivated so I will kind of being productive with my thesis for maybe one week but after that my motivation decreases again, and when I get a new consultation, I will get more motivation....So I don't know whether I need the consultation anymore because I already get all the practical suggestions or the tactics I can use for my thesis so I think it's my own problem”.

Regarding the student mental health services, Alan, you recognised that the only reference you had were the *“psychologists from the Uni”* and there was *“this kind of health center”* where you could find online chat for specific hours and that would be your first point of contact. You had been suggested by a nurse to contact the occupational health where you were working at. You shared your thoughts regarding the nurses' advice:

“I had just started in that company, it was a small company. I did not feel comfortable to talk with one of my bosses, how can I have access to...? It’s really small, probably I have to go directly to a clinic”.

Lien, you mentioned a not very positive experience with the nurse at the Finnish Student Health Services. You told me: *“the receptionist, she looked at me very blank, and very cold, and no empathy or whatsoever... And she just said every doctor is busy, if you want to see the nurse then she can book that for me...”*. You preferred, therefore, to apply our international health assurance, assisting to a private clinic center. However, once in the private clinic, you shared how doctors had put you through lots of tests, even though you perceived problems came from your emotions and not from the physical health, but *“at least”* they had prescribed some medicine to improve your physical health in that moment.

Sangmu, while describing your story, you told me that you were diagnosed with depression and that you were recommended by the psychologist to visit the doctor *“who can prescribe the medicine”* (psychiatrist). Then, you developed on your experience:

“Actually it’s the only not so satisfying experience that I had here, that the psychiatrist doesn’t really speak English...And in this kind of situation you really need like proper communication so the communication between us is really bad”.

This communication issue also affected your understanding on whether to take or not the medicine prescribed by the doctor. In the end, you gave up on the idea of the consultation because of the miscommunication problem. Purnima, you added another perspective regarding the language barriers. You shared how you did not draw on the local counselling services because they were *“majorly in Finnish”*, and you said: *“Maybe it’s better to speak to somebody who can talk in my mother tongue, that was that....”*.

So, here I share a wonder that came up in your stories: Where, when and with whom can we talk about our emotions? Lien, you highlighted how difficult can be to find friends to rely on, *“trying to get empathy from them”*, and disclose the challenges you were going through. However, when the depression got *“too bad”* you shared how you felt that you could not *“handle”* yourself and you tried to reach professional help. Although you managed to make an appointment for the following week, you reflected on how indeed, *“sometimes the help comes so slow that, might be, the problem is partly solved”*. So, even though symptoms can disappear and

“things get better...the roots are still there”, you said, and you argued how difficult it was to “escape” from the “drama things”.

I remember when Mai, you shared how helpful was the moment when you drew on the Finnish Student Health Services support. Not only did you obtain support from health professionals but also this step enabled you to ask for certificates justifying that academic performance that year, which had been undermined by depression and difficulties to follow-up the courses. I related this event to Nerine’s experience, guided by friends from your same faith, you approached nurses and the psychiatrist at the Student Health Services who helped you to understand and identify the diagnosis, which you had been living with for months.

Sangmu, you also described a turning point in your life when you reached help from a career counsellor at the University who guided you to find an internship that you were passionate about, in relation to your high interest for European culture. Then, the second type of consultation took place at the “University hospital” (Finnish Student Health Services) since you were experiencing problems with your parents. When you started therapy, you felt quite opened to share your family issues, and after several sessions, the consultant helped you to realise in what ways the communication with your parents could be improved.

Purnima, you had found a group of friends at the University who you would feel comfortable to share your feelings and emotions. At the institutional level, you seemed relieved to find an event organised for students at the University. This event had enabled you to discuss with other students the challenging lack of spaces for students to talk about emotions. So, it is time to think in practical terms, what can be done? And Mai’s, Lien’s, Purnima’s, Nesrine’s, and Rohan’s stories, helped this letter to frame international student experience with a holistic perspective. First, because Mai and Lien, you talked about Buddhism and meditation. Nesrine, you discussed about religion. Rohan, you talked about a “puzzle” that you needed to solve when you referred to psychological well-being. And Purnima, you shared a critical standpoint regarding how the University dealt with international students’ experiences. I think your words summarise the idea:

“I’m pretty sure people struggle so much and it should be also the case of severe anxiety or depression (.....) it could simply be a highly stressful week and it needs to be taken into consideration because ultimately it does impact in an holistic sort of experience here (...)it’s just this feeling of disappointment with the University which is a very international University to not have these spaces which are very popular”.

You also argued how the University treated learning and education as very mechanical. So, you helped me to reflect on psychological well-being from a broader perspective. You questioned whether people not talking really about their feelings was just a phenomenon of society, which would then be translated into the university structure and planning. And even though you described teachers as comprehensive, sensitive and caring in most of the cases, you doubted if they were “*equipped enough*” and committed as well, to learn to handle a student for having a nervous pick in the classroom for example. You reminded me of my experience as a master student when you compared how social expectations regarding master students’ autonomy meant for you a “*baggage*” which you would carry, telling yourself: “*I’m a master student! How can I lose all of my nerves here at the University?*”.

After having a demotivating experience with your academic coordinator who did not connect well with students, you raised the question about how aware the university was of mental health. You identified in your experience with Kummi students two sides-A and B- of the story: reflected on the A and B side of that Kummi answer you had received before arriving to Oulu. The A explanation considered that Kummi tutor students did not know how to guide you, but the B explanation perceived a lack of caring and dismissive tone of their answer. So, you suggested to implement a guideline for Kummi training sessions, or “*maybe the university should prepare one or two introductory lines that this is how you can approach these conversations*” (regarding mental health). Then you hesitated by questioning “*can there be preventive actions?*” You talked about prevention suits for people who are first experiencing stress in a foreign country, but in the case of carrying with us previous diagnosis, the strategies would be focused on “*tackling it out, or management of mental health and disorders*”.

What you sounded very certain and straightforward was about the need of more visibility regarding mental health information, even though you recognised study psychologists’ UniOulu Instagram stories were a good initiative. As regards the Finnish Student health center, you suggested more visibility of mental health on their website. You then added a recommendation on “*having an international person as a counselor too*”. You also talked about peer groups/circles centered on mental health issues as a good strategy, but at the same time you pointed out the need of these groups to be moderated by a professional, since “*these discussions also have trigger points for people*”. Later, you shed a light on student parties and the role of student guilds. Even though we discussed how popular are parties, particularly in Finland, you wondered whether the picture of the University should be one that encourages only fun. Instead, you claimed, “*we can also have another picture that the University says, ‘Oh we care, for*

you ”. Student guilds could also play a role because of their key role at addressing student concerns: you pointed out how they could increase their outreach regarding psychological support creating opportunities, such as fair stations giving the message:

“Hey you know what, be comfortable and we understand that there are student who might go through these things and there are channels and the guild can be one POC, point of contact, if not OYY”.

On the academic support level, I now remember Sangmu’s story and your struggle with thesis. When you suggested relying on thesis groups, which consisted of meeting people to study together with, you had heard they had this type of groups only for Finnish students. Your idea resonated with my personal international student experience: at that time, I was counting with a “thesis crew” who I would meet at the library once a week and support each other. In the end of the interview, we agreed to meet one time at the library.

Alan, you exemplified moments when you saw that teachers cared for international students: *“I think they did a really good work putting everyone together”*. You said that in most of the subjects, you had seen professors *“really spending time”* integrating international with *“Fins”* in different assignments and presentations:

“I think that is the most important thing and here it has been different to my experience in other countries I feel very happy to be here in this sort of environment”.

You discussed the importance of open and meeting spaces at the University of Oulu, such as Tellus. You remembered how helpful it was to get to know about interest groups/societies:

“I think that is a wonderful resource because again, by the end of the day, it is how you interact with people, the less you do that, the more issues come to the surface, because kind of loneliness in a way”.

Despite most of these societies’ information was in Finnish language. You clarified that you didn’t expect to have English translations since it was made by students and because *“they have limited resources putting together with similar interest”*. Then you added, *“but maybe it could be any kind of resource from my perspective that is related to the idea of having people together I think it would be worth to have a short description in English”*. Alan also suggested promoting sports and different kind of activities for students:

“One of the biggest advantages when you are a student you have a place to start with , when you go to these student groups even the health student center, you have something that can help you , guide you through, someone to ask for help straight away (...) what I can highlight before arriving here assigning this kind of tutor, kummis, that help you with the initial steps in the place...I don't know exactly how these things can be correlated to mental well-being (...) but what it not clear for me it's who in this kind of situation should care, take this kind of responsibility, or accountability, in a way (...) because it is not something that you can really point it out, the mental well-being, from the nurses, pedagogical place, it doesn't work that way”.

In the end, I was glad to hear from you that this thesis could be meaningful for you in that way, when you told me that was one of the reasons you had joined the research, because of the need of start thinking on international students when proposing psychological well-being support at higher education level. Purnima you helped me to frame this thesis in a practical level, when you said that *“this kind of study is also one of those steps that the University can take, having maybe like a reach out like a shelf here, where you get information about these things here ...maybe the Uni health center can have on their website maybe a more visible section about Finnish Student Health Services, or even the student union I would say, because student union is pretty old, and the Uni as an organisation, they can do something like this”* .

Finally, Lien, Rohan, Aliya, Mai, Alan, Nesrine, Sangmu and Purnima...your stories presented in *Their Story* and related in this letter have aimed to represent the findings of this study through a non-linear and relational approach. In the same way you suggested more accessible information regarding psychological well-being of international students, this study and findings chapters intended to support and resonate with international students who might experience wonders in relation to their psychological well-being while studying abroad.

If you seek to read more the interpretation of these findings, I suggest you reading the following chapter. I thank you again for allowing me to research on your inspiring stories.

With affection,

Ana

7 Discussion

This chapter will interpret the findings and discuss the implications of this study. The purpose of the discussion is to create a dynamic and reflective dialogue between the findings and the contextual and theoretical framework of this thesis. This qualitative research study aimed to understand, mainly, how postgraduate international students told their experiences with psychological well-being at the University of Oulu. The second research puzzle of this thesis sought to understand how psychological well-being services featured in participants' stories.

Findings of this study show that the eight postgraduate international students' experiences on psychological well-being at the University of Oulu need to be understood from cross-cultural and multidimensional lenses. Addressing the first research puzzle, students' stories reflected an interrelation between different dimensions experienced throughout their studies, in relation to psychological well-being. These dimensions are identified in this study as temporal dimension; environmental/contextual/socio-cultural dimension; multidimensional intercultural experience; academic/educational dimension; mental health dimension. Although, it is quite challenging to separate the results on the basis of different dimensions because many of them overlap, for the purpose of making connections with the theoretical framework and contextual background of this thesis, this section will discuss these dimensions separately.

The first research puzzle^ñ was intertwined with the second research puzzle. In this way, study's findings identified certain dimensions that would interrelate between each other when postgraduate international students talked about psychological well-being as well as their experiences with psychological well-being support services. Three dimensions were labelled as individual, situational and institutional/governmental levels.

Then, the interrelation between the eight dimensions would encounter at a central dimension, identified as a "Gaps and implications" dimension. The figure below presents this chapter as a discussion puzzle. Hence, this discussion chapter will address the dimensions of both research puzzles, in the order as they have been previously presented.

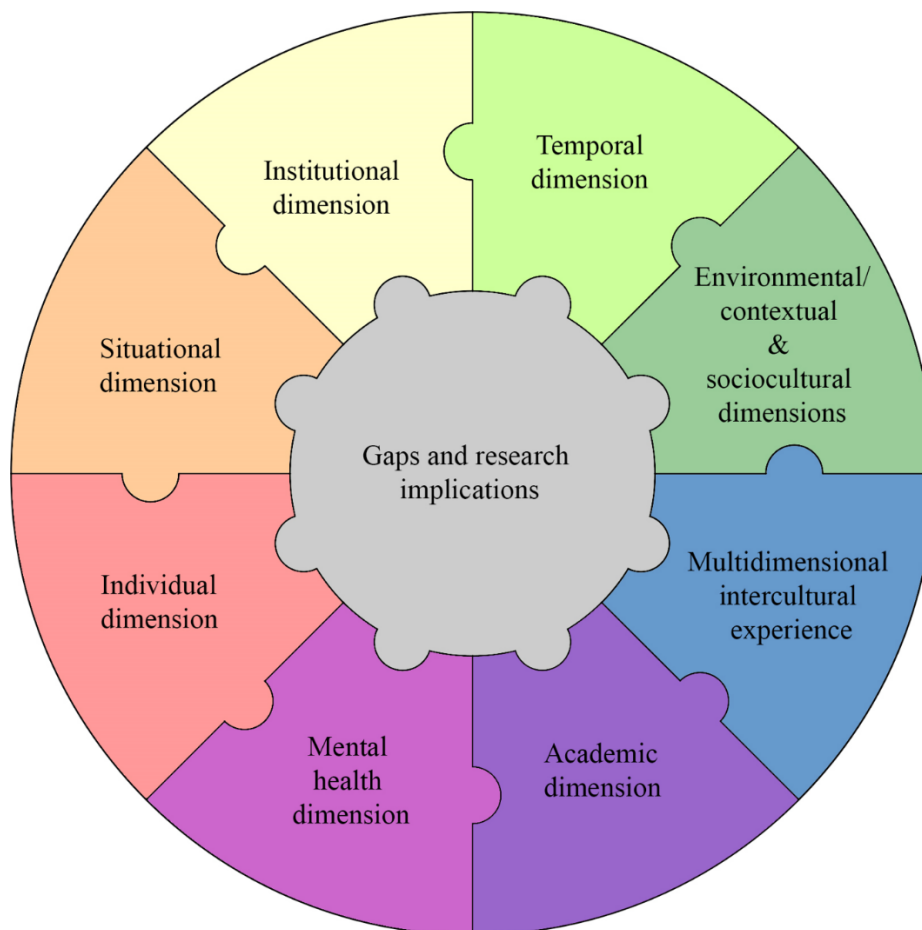


Figure 7. Discussion puzzle

7.1 Discussing the first research puzzle

Temporal dimension

This study's findings are framed in the context of internationalisation phenomenon as a multi-dimensional process (Medvedeva, 2018) in a postmodern society with connections to individuals' mental health (Whitley, 2008).

The study noticed the importance of past experiences and life story in order to understand how postgraduate international students experienced psychological well-being at the University of Oulu. In this sense, childhood experiences, family interactions and intimate relationships from the past, sometimes described as traumas, would be present in students' stories. Additionally, connected with internationalisation opportunities for individuals, some students reflected on their previous experiences living abroad —either doing a student exchange, a double master's

degree program, or internship. As Calikoglu (2018) argues, students tend to compare challenges faced with previous international experiences. In this study, one student compared his experience with psychological well-being services at the previous country where he had studied and lived abroad. Hence, in a general overview of this study, students' psychological well-being experiences and social interactions abroad —with group of host and international students, with intimate partners, or with psychological well-being services — seemed to act as a point of reference to compare their “present” experience at the University of Oulu.

In this study, feelings of loneliness, depression, stress, and anxiety – often identified characteristics of postmodern societies (Whitley, 2008) – were repeatedly emerging from students' stories. Connected to the “past” factor that this thesis took into consideration, two students described thoroughly intimate “break-up” experiences with intimate relationships as very disappointing, and with long-term consequences on their psychological well-being. Following Whitley (2008), in conditions of postmodernity, the expectations of ontological security that participants had placed on these intimate relationships had not been successfully fulfilled (p.359). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the complexity of understanding each individual story. For instance, one of the students connected her parents' marriage, to the type of intimate relationships she had encountered with.

Environmental/contextual dimension & sociocultural dimension

It is important to understand the situation that postgraduate international students encounter in the Finnish context. Connected with the previous temporal dimension, weather and seasons in Finland played a key role in students' stories. This study shows that stories talked about psychological adjustment to the new weather and environment of Finland. All students of this study described, in different ways, the psychological well-being challenges experienced in correlation with the weather. Winter, darkness and the beginning of spring were moments identified by students in connection to states of depression, anxiety, derealisation, changes in sleeping or eating habits. Also, one student felt that the connection with nature in Finland provided her with quietness which enabled her to pay closer attention to her own thoughts and psychological well-being.

In order to understand the experiences of postgraduate international students in Finland, connected with their psychological well-being, this study found the importance of considering personal background of students (Calikoglu, 2018) and the intersection between motivation and expectations before arriving to the country and the arrival experience. First, this study took into

consideration the role of “regional, economic and geographical conditions” together with the students’ personal cultural background (Calikoglu, 2018, p.452). All participant students shared a non-European contextual background, which implicates a culture distance between their society of origin and Finland, also as a non-native-English speaking country.

Finland was described by students as an individualist society, where individuals were “separated” between each other, but still connected. Characteristics such as trust, respect for personal boundaries and quietness were a positive factor of Finnish society in some stories. Also, Finland was described as part of the European region and characterised for being a developed country, with economic, cultural and environmental conditions that would “pull” students to choose the country among other options. In this way, push-pull model framework supports these study’s findings (Calikoglu, 2018; Cai & Kivistö, 2013) regarding three stories which identified different push factors and pull factors. Push factors such as “cultural, educational and environmental pollution” were identified by one of the students; or economical struggles at the society of origin were identified by another student. One student, however, expressed the disappointment with Finland as a developed country. This feeling was originated in the struggle experienced when the student’s high expectations of a developed country intersected with a master program perceived as disorganised and without possibilities for integrating international students with Finnish classmates. Hence, personal motivations and pull factors for coming to Finland played a key factor in students’ stories. One student sought for a country with European culture. Other students highlighted pull factors such as education quality and lower tuition fees when they chose the higher education program. Economic factors also motivated students to choose Finland: one student highlighted the potential job opportunities and advanced economic conditions.

Finally, it was interesting to perceive a connection between socio-cultural and environmental dimensions, when one of the students talked about the quietness from nature and the society as assets for choosing Finland as the host country to study abroad. The same student had applied “cultural pollution” term for describing the push factor from her society of origin. Hence, it can be understood that the student applied an environmental phenomenon and term —“pollution”— to describe a cultural aspect the society of origin. As a limitation, this study has not addressed literature on cultural pollution. Nonetheless, it is recommended to explore this term in further studies related to motivations and experiences of international students’ experiences abroad.

The multidimensional intercultural experience

Interestingly, the thesis findings also understood the intercultural experience of postgraduate international students from a “multi-dimensional understanding of the processes involved in the acculturation of international students” (Zhou et al., 2008 in Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6). First, student participants were considered in this study as proactive agents (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6; Zhou et al., 2008), who could respond to challenges embedded with the experience at the environment of University of Oulu. In this way, findings work similarly to the ABC model theoretical framework, which is comprised of an interrelational “culture synergy” between stress and coping (A), culture learning (B), and social identification theories (C). Some students described the transition of moving to Finland as a moment of happiness and of fulfilling a personal dream. However, life changes could be intrinsically stressful for some students, who shared concern and fears for their student path and psychological well-being. Students, based on individual, social support and situational factors actively applied diverse coping strategies in order to deal with stressful situations (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6; Zhou et al., 2008, p. 65). In terms of whom they would draw on for asking help, students expressed family, friends, and professionals. While some students relied on very supportive flat-mates, others suffered from accommodation problems that would interfere with their work and study routine. At the same time, some students identified start-up events and working with the community as coping strategies. From the affective theory lens (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6), these groups would act as social support groups for international students, as long as there were trustworthy, and they would share feelings of relying on each other. Other students would prefer to deal with situations by themselves without disclosing their psychological well-being challenges with others. Yet, they would find in these groups a way of calming their anxiety or depression. Other coping strategy was reflected in students who practised sports.

One student also talked about the behavioral dimension (B) of the social and intercultural contact (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.6; Zhou et al., 2008, p.65). Finnish language acted as an academic stressor and barrier to the participant’s participation in one lecture—where majority of classmates were Finnish. Culture distance and religious background would also act as a barrier for the student’s integration with the class. For instance, the student did not feel comfortable attending traditional Finnish student social gatherings.

From the social identification lenses, during the cross-cultural transition, students reflected

on changes in perceptions of self and identity (Zhou et al., 2008, p.67). One student in particular referred to the Finnish respect for personal boundaries within an international network, which enabled her to find her own identity. She contrasted this experience with her society of origin, described as a collectivist society where she felt like she was wearing a “mask”.

Academic dimension

In this study, following Educational and life transitions (ELT) model, findings show that both student life and educational dimensions would affect directly, or indirectly, international students’ psychological well-being. Students’ stories showed a dynamic aspect of transitions that international students experience when adapting to the new country and higher education system (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.8). Also depending on the length of their stay at Oulu, or if they had moved for a study exchange/internship during their studies, some students would show a back and forth movement between academic life and the everyday life aspects which would be interrelated with their psychological well-being. Whereas first year students discussed more pre-arrival experiences and concentrated on the cultural adaptation to the new country, students with more length of stay in Oulu would be concerned for academic issues, such as lack of motivation or feeling stuck in the process of writing thesis. In addition, Finnish language appeared as a barrier in terms of students’ life transitions when Finnish language would challenge international students’ access to information regarding psychological well-being services at the University of Oulu.

Interestingly, some students would describe the accumulation of negative moments as situations of “everything comes together”, which can be interpreted through Jindal-Snape and Rienties’ (2016) concept of the “downward spiral”. One student who encountered problems with her accommodation and social bonds, faced sleeping routine changes which had negative consequences on her student and work routine. Then, two other students experienced academic challenges that were intrinsically connected with financial aspects of maintaining or not the scholarship renewal opportunity during the second year. These challenging situations were reflected in their stories as moments of high stress, depression, loneliness, changes in sleeping habits, and lack of concentration at the University.

On the other hand, when the positive experience was stronger, it could act as a “buffer” for the negative experiences (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.7). One student who was dealing with academic demotivation —based on the master program which she had not chosen by herself

found a “buffer” when she was guided to obtain the internship based on her actual interest. The other student who was living with feeling of “giving up”, but still praying, unexpectedly met people from her religion that helped her to think strategies to overcome the challenging situation she was experiencing. This social support acted not only as a “buffer” in her story, but also a way to convert a “downward spiral” as mentioned before, into an “upward” spiral. For example, the two students who experienced challenges with reaching the credits required to maintain their scholarship, eventually sought for psychological well-being professional help. Acknowledging and understanding their diagnoses and what they were internally dealing with would be a first big step to take further life and educational decisions. Nevertheless, the other student shared how she perceived self-development and student path as two paths very different from each other. Overall, as Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016) argue, the connection of academic stressor with lifestyle stressors depended, in this study, on the individual cognitive appraisal of each participant.

Regarding Resilience Theory (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016) one of the stories dealt with a “survival instinct” which made one of the international students overcome difficult situations. This related to Calikoglu’s (2018) findings of a student describing the experience in Finland from a “survival approach. All students’ stories encompassed, in different approaches a sense of positive adaptation to challenging contexts/situations. In this way, some negative transitions, for example in the academic level, became opportunities within time to gain a sense of self-acceptance and personal growth.

Self-esteem, which is an internal protective factor for Resilience Theory (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016), played a role in undermining one students’ psychological well-being when being low. When the student learnt to compliment herself, individually or surrounded by close friends, her psychological well-being became more balanced. Hence, external protective factors, such as supportive relationships would help most of the students’ stories to buffer against the multiple risks at the time of transition. These relationships could be situated locally at the University, or also at distance maintaining contact with family and close friends from students’ society of origin. Nevertheless, in this study, community networks can easily become risk factors, also identified as “triggering” moments, when students voluntarily help other individuals experiencing challenging situations, and do not find a “place” where to disclose these emotions.

Mental health dimension

In this study, most of student stories addressed mental health from a non-linear and holistic approach. This finding is in line with the World Health Organization understanding of mental health as closely interrelational with physical and social health (WHO, 2001, p.3). However, in the same way as the World Health Organization has acknowledged the difficulty of defining mental health because of cultural differences and understandings which we may find in scholarship (WHO, 2001, p.5), this study has also found the same challenge when listening to research participants' experiences.

Following a cross-cultural perspective and Buddhist theoretical premises, this study found in students' stories situations of balance and imbalance in the mind (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). Hence, students talked about intentions and motivations as well as about attentional aspects of their studies. They shared cognitive appraisal of different situations experienced and finally, they highlighted their affective balance and the importance of understanding and disclosing their emotions. A "suffering" state would be often catalyzed by social and contextual situations as sources of their perceived anxiety, depression, or frustration (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p.695). Also, stories showed the fluctuating nature of phenomena (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). In this way, stories would fluctuate between either internal or external, and pleasant or unpleasant situations. For instance, it was interesting to interpret from three of student stories a 'maximizer' attitude, either when they talked about perfectionism, or in their approach to set ambitious goals in life. This attitude would seek the best outcomes through external perfection, elevating the risk of suffering in case those goals were not achieved.

In the same way as Wallace and Shapiro's (2006) mental balance model, one key finding that can be interpreted from this study is that when balance is achieved in one area, it has an impact on the other three components of mental balance (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p. 693). And cognitive processes—intentions—would come first when students decided to improve their psychological well-being situation. This decision would influence in either attentional, cognitive and/or affective balance of international students of this study. One student chose to be guided by a self-help book, which helped her understand her own cognitive processes, and in that way, control her affective balance.

The concept of subjective well-being (Christopher, 1999) was perceived when participants evaluated the balance between the positive and negative "highlights" in their experiences at the University of Oulu and in life. Emotional intelligence was reflected in their experiences with

self-acceptance, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and somatic complaints (Carmeli et al., 2009). As Huppert (2009) argues, this thesis shows that psychological well-being can be compromised when negative emotions are extreme or last longer than what people can manage. Students would sometimes understand their emotions through physical and mental states. Most students' stories reflected on self-centered emotions more than other-centered emotions (Christopher, 1999, p.144). Nevertheless, when discussing their intention of overcoming challenging psychological well-being situations, two students reflected on the importance of feeling connected to others, engaging in extracurricular and community activities. Another student highlighted the importance of relying on others to share with them personal issues that she was dealing with.

Following Ryff's model on psychological well-being, students told stories referred to most of the six dimensions (Carmeli et al., 2009; in Huppert & So, 2013). First, student stories talked about personal growth gained from their experiences with psychological well-being. Secondly, maintaining positive relationships played a key role for their psychological well-being support networks. Thirdly, self-acceptance was referred in cases when students evaluated positively their past experiences, in the same way as their present and expectations for the future. One student discussed explicitly about autonomy in their studies, and how this become a challenge for her. Even though participants did not refer to "purpose of life" or creating a "meaningful life", it can be perceived in the depth of their present reflections about what they have learnt from the past, as well as sharing personal expectations for their future. Practising sports and helping others through social community networks were named by students as intentions of caring for their psychological well-being (Huppert, 2009, p.148).

One interesting finding of this study was related to the key role of religion and spirituality for one student's experience with psychological well-being. In this sense, as seen in the theoretical framework of this thesis, religion can be seen as a set of virtues contributing to the individuals' positive mental health approaches, or we can discuss the term spiritual well-being as independent from psychological —hedonic or eudaimonic— approaches (Nelson, 2009, p.359). What was important for this thesis was that faith and religion contributed with the students' upward spiral, in the sense of that the student started to find solutions to a very difficult and stressful time of her life. Depending on each student's sociocultural and religious background, this thesis contributes with the importance of considering spirituality and its interrelation with psychological well-being and student life at the higher education level.

7.2 Discussing the second research puzzle

So far, this thesis findings have focused on the individual adaptation and experiences. In this section, it is necessary to discuss the findings concentrating as well on students' perspectives of how the environment can be changed to suit the needs of the individual (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.7). This study's findings identified certain dimensions that would interrelate between each other when postgraduate international students talked about their psychological well-being and their experiences with seeking for psychological well-being support. Three dimensions were labelled first as individual, situational and institutional/governmental levels. Finally, the interrelation between the three dimensions with the previous five dimensions encounter at a central dimension for this study and discussion section, identified as a "gaps and implications" dimension.

First, the individual dimension resonates with OYY (2019) findings on how individual characteristics and previous experiences with psychological well-being services are important to consider when students seek for help at psychological well-being support services. This dimension therefore includes students' mental balance (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006); personality, regional, economical and sociocultural background, perception of mental health in their society of origin, positive or traumatic past life experiences; motivations to study abroad in Finland, perceptions of cultural distance between society of origin and society of settlement, social relationships with family, friends or intimate partners, subjective understanding of mental health/psychological well-being, previous experiences with psychological well-being services, and previous diagnoses on psychological well-being. All these factors, which appeared differently in each student participant story, would shape, mainly, their experience at the University of Oulu.

Secondly, in terms of the situational dimension, it is important to be aware that students' stories were placed in different moments. Some of them had been living in Finland for four years, others for three months. They studied different master programs, at different faculties. There is a diversity in terms of teachers, teacher tutors, Kummi student tutors, group of classmates, number of host country classmates in the class, and the psychological well-being support services that appeared in their stories. In this sense, it is not possible to generalise students' experiences because of the diversity of actors involved in their stories, and in different sequences of time. It is still important to acknowledge that this situational dimension, in the same way as the individual dimension, affected every student story differently from each

other.

Thirdly, in terms of the institutional and governmental dimension, the focus of the thesis was not on the University of Oulu management and approach towards psychological well-being of international students. This dimension is built by research participants' experiences and their perceptions of the University of Oulu's different psychological well-being support services, the Finnish Student Health Services and external health centers. Students mentioned in their stories, repeatedly, their experiences with the Finnish Student Health Services. Their observations implicated other actors situated at the University of Oulu, such as study psychologists, visitor careers counsellors, Kummi tutor students, student guilds, the Student Union, tutor teachers and teachers. Outside the University of Oulu, students mentioned their job health care assurance and private clinic centers. Additionally, the thesis findings have been interpreted in light of the report carried for the Student Union (OYY, 2019), focused on psychological wellbeing support services of the University of Oulu.

Finally, the last dimension originated from the intersection of all the previous dimensions. In other words, the study's findings are concerned with Medvedeva (2018) argument on communication gaps between international students and spaces for participation at the University. Therefore, it can be interpreted that stories reflected different miscommunication barriers or gaps between the individual, situational and institutional/ governmental dimensions. This study's findings suggest that eventually, these gaps had an impact on psychological well-being experiences of international students. Next, the four dimensions will be addressed in different themes.

Individual barrier

First, the individual dimension plays a key role in the stage of asking, or not, for help. One international student for example, did not go to the Finnish Student Health service, among other reasons, for the fear of not being understood. Two students discussed different understandings of mental health in their society of origin which would delay or stop them from seeking for help. Another student recognised a personal criticism on the type of information he had disclosed with the study psychologist. He pointed out that he was not satisfied with the advice received, but also, he acknowledged that he had only focused on task oriented and challenges, when instead he was experiencing other difficulties in terms of his psychological well-being.

Gaps in information, visibility, language, and cultural barriers with psychological well-being support services

The lack of visibility, information and institutional awareness of psychological well-being services was also pointed out in student stories as a barrier that would stop them from seeking for psychological well-being support. Also, language gaps were noticed in terms of not finding information regarding psychological well-being services in English. Lack of visibility and information was noticed by some students on the psychological well-being services methodology of work. Students described their encounters with nurses as intimidating, confusing and with lack of agency for the students to share what they really demanded. Hence, lack of understanding —because of cultural and/or language differences — between the psychological well-being support representatives and students were perceived in student stories as gaps in communication, which affected students' mental balance and/or views of these services.

In terms of the different guidance and psychological well-being, support services that the University of Oulu offers, there were some similarities between OYY's (2019) research report findings and this study's findings and implications. Students referred to sociocultural barriers in terms of language and communication with nurses and doctors at the *Finnish Student Health Service*. In highly stressful situations, these services had been very helpful for some students who needed to justify their psychological well-being challenging situation in the academic level. Also, these services were involved in diagnosis and prescription of medicine if students required so. However, in some stories the medical model intersected with students' perspectives of mental health and created misunderstandings between professionals and the students.

While study psychologists from the University of Oulu were supportive for some students, others did not find the service helpful. Challenges were faced in terms of delay in reaching an appointment with them, or with students' expectations which were not totally fulfilled. One student lied to stop attending the sessions. The service was described as task-oriented, which is how the same service has characterised itself in the OYY report (OYY, 2019). The study findings implicate, from one side, that students would need more information about the service to balance their expectations. From the other side, this service could offer more personalised and less general suggestions for students' concerns of academic issues embedded with psychological well-being. Also, the delay in answering student requests for appointment could make students forget within time of their concerns. Hence, it is implied that students may require more "follow up" communication with this service, from the initial point. So even though study

psychologists focus on the studying techniques, this study acknowledges their key preventive role because they can recommend students to contact the Finnish Student Health Services if needed (OYY, 2019).

Implications for psychological well-being support services

The Student Union's tasks concerning health promotion and community health actions (OYY, 2019) play a key role in this thesis. Visibility campaigns, offering more information such as shelves of books, more spaces for talking about emotions and psychological well-being and continuing with their work with bilingual and accessible information to both Finnish and English-speakers (OYY, 2019) is a key implication of this study. Since religion, different worldviews, spiritual well-being, affective balance, and intimate relationship concerns of students appeared in the findings, the role of the university chaplain is very important for this study's implications. The University chaplain (OYY, 2019) could have a key role addressing some of the misunderstandings between mental health different models that arise from cultural differences between the international student and the mental health professionals in Finland. Also, individual or group sessions could provide students with spaces to talk about their emotions.

Student stories differed in their experiences with teachers, tutor teachers and Kummi student tutors. Nevertheless, findings imply more training in relation to detecting psychological well-being concerns of students, from a caring approach. This thesis shows, in line with the OYY (2019) report, that the Kummi tutor services can be preventive when helping new students to integrate to the university life. This study found that the attitude, level of commitment to listen and guide students and mental health awareness of Kummi student tutors can play a key role in shaping students' studies (OYY, 2019). However, in addition to this point and in line with the focus of this study, Kummi tutor students can shape positively or negatively students' perceptions of psychological well-being services in Finland. In the same way as the majority of psychological well-being services recognised room for improvement in terms of psychological well-being awareness, training and collaboration (OYY, 2019), student stories also demanded to strengthen the University's cultural awareness and a culture of caring regarding psychological well-being of international students.

More spaces and training for hearing students' voices and emotions

Three student participants were concerned for more spaces where to prevent, discuss and “tackle” international students’ psychological well-being, student life and emotions. Also, one student suggested to enhance Kummi tutor students training as well as teachers awareness to respond comprehensively to psychological well-being of international students. The importance of visibility, English language access and professionals leading these activities played a key role in their students’ proposals. The role of student guilds was referred by one student as an important point of contact, in terms of developing a more caring approach at the University’ culture. It was recommended to implement services and spaces such as the guidance from international counsellors or having the possibility to disclose aspects of psychological well-being on the students’ mother tongue.

Thereby, this study shows the diverse experiences and outcomes that result from the “cross-roads” between different medical approaches and cultural perspectives regarding mental health. For example, the medical model perceived by students from psychological well-being services would collide with more positive, holistic, and emotional perspectives on the therapy students were seeking for. This finding is in line with Whitley’s (2008, p.358) sociological perspective criticism on mental health services, where it is argued to be a predominance of medicalisation, particularly in the field of psychiatry. It seems that some research participants in this thesis have argued for more community-based practices, where more empowerment could be given to students’ voice and participation through the connection with other perspectives (Whitley, 2008).

Based on Christopher’s (1999) research, this study’s findings implicate for both sides —students and psychological well-being support services— to work from a reciprocal cross-cultural understanding of psychological well-being. This disclosure is related to the visibility and information. If students are informed about the application of psychological well-being in counselling services, it can be a first step to avoid feelings of uncertainty and disappointment with these services. Then, it is suggested for psychological well-being support representatives to listen and understand the individual dimension previously mentioned. Furthermore, the thesis findings claimed for more dialogical and multicultural approaches (Christopher, 1999; Hanrahan, 2013) that could enable relocating the individual and institutional dimensions in an “experienced world”.

8 My story

As a qualitative researcher, I feel committed to discuss ethical considerations of this research project. “My story” chapter addresses a deep and transparent reflection at the final stage of this study, in which I question my own values, cultural background, and my standpoint in this study (Trahar, 2009). Furthermore, my aim is to evaluate this study and guide readers to the conclusion and implications of this study.

8.1 First considerations

In order to first evaluate this study, I rely on the criteria explained by Creswell & Poth (2007, p.214-215) who define what is a “good” narrative study. Most of narrative studies focus on a single or two or three individuals. This study focused on eight individuals, which challenged me as a researcher during data collection and data analysis stages. Even though it has been my intention to analyse all the stories equally and thoroughly, I am aware that eight stories for narrative research turned to be ambitious for a first research study. Another limitation of this narrative inquiry study is that stories were collected in one interview meeting. Narrative inquiries are known for researcher *living alongside* the research participants for longer periods of time. Even though I felt that I connected and built a mutual relation of respect and collaboration with every student participant, I am aware that because of the scope of this study, I could not follow their stories for longer periods of time. Moreover, I must clarify my researcher decision to focus more on the relational aspects of stories rather than the chronological aspects of the stories. This decision was taken because of two main reasons. First, I was following a holistic data analysis approach when I took the decision. Secondly, the diversity of students’ stories in terms of their time of studying at the University of Oulu was challenging to analyse in the beginning. However, at the end of this stage, I am mindful and curious how different could the findings of this study be if I had concentrated more accurately on the different events that happened whether on the first, second, or third year of studies. Perhaps further studies could follow a group of students with similar time of living abroad and studying at the University of Oulu, for longer periods of time.

Nonetheless, interviewing eight voluntary participants was coherent with the social justice purpose of this study, which aims to open the discussion of psychological well-being of international students at an institutional level. I also think that the relational dimension of narrative inquiry was accomplished in this study.

The second part of this chapter will review six criteria which have helped me to evaluate the trustworthiness and quality of this study. The terms that have guided me to understand my standpoint in this research journey are crystallisation, resonance, sincerity, vulnerability, relational ethics and borderlands (Clandinin et al., 2018; Lessard et al., 2018; Trahar, 2010). At this stage of the thesis, they help me to illuminate the quality of this narrative inquiry study as well. I will also return to discuss my ontological commitment with participants, since this aspect is concerned with the validation of findings as well.

8.2 Evaluating the research journey

Crystallisation

Following Tracy (2010), one of the criteria to evaluate the quality of this study's puzzle or wonder is crystallisation. The definition of crystal has similarities with this study's research puzzles in the way of following a multidimensional approach:

“This crystal combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934 in Tracy, 2010, p.843-844).

In this way, crystallisation criteria has encouraged this research to collect and apply various research methods and theories. It has been evident to me throughout the research process that I was not seeking a more valid singular truth (Tracy, 2010, p.844). Instead, my aim has been to open up more complex and in-depth understanding of the research puzzle. As a multidimensional puzzle and wonder, this narrative inquiry study sought to gather numerous theoretical frameworks, addressing the difficulty to find any universal answer to the students' stories, which are socially and culturally diverse in their cultural roots. I have also relied on participants' collaboration in the beginning phase of the thesis. Nevertheless, I have not addressed different types of data or methods, nor could address a final collaboration with research participants which would have made this study more in-depth and richer.

Resonance

On the other hand, following Caine et al. (2013), I carefully and attentively worked to honor the lives of all participants. In this process, I pulled forward and illustrated the resonances threads across the participants' experiences. The aim was "to highlight the temporal, unfolding, contextual nature of the threads rather than the certainty of the threads as fixed, frozen, or context (life) independent" (Clandinin, 2013, p.143). A meaningful resonance on the audience can potentially promote "empathy, identification and reverberation of the research by readers who have no direct experience with the topic discussed" (Tracy, 2010, p.844)

I believe that presenting the findings as a letter has more impact and the potential accessibility to more readers. I would like this letter (and thesis) to be accessible for the academic community, but mostly for international students and for the institutional level who are responsible for policy making regarding international students' psychological well-being. In this way, my aim is that readers, no matter the context and specified time, can empathise with the students' stories and "intuitively transfer the research to their own action" (Tracy 2010, p.845).

Sincerity

I have argued from the beginning of my thesis, my aim is to be honest with the audience, and particularly with the thesis participants. But also, a research process demands honesty and authenticity with oneself and the research itself (Tracy, 2010, p.842). I agree with Tracy (2010, p.842) when she argues that "self-reflexivity and transparency are two valuable means by which to achieve sincerity in qualitative research".

In the introduction of this thesis I have described how I had a personal interest for this thesis topic because of my vocation for service and my interest in "building" bridges between health and education. Nevertheless, what I did not describe in detail in the beginning of my thesis, because I wanted to highlight students' stories, is that I also lived challenging experiences during my student journey in Finland. And this is the story I was able to share with the research participants once before or after our interviews. There was a sense of empathy we shared because we would understand each other. Understanding each other would also create trust. And that trust, would create a safe space for me and for them. Below I will share my personal story I shared with research participants: some of them heard all the details, but most of them the summary of this story.

I have also faced mental health challenges in Finland. I arrived in Finland with a dream that had come true. But the truth was that since my adolescence, I had carried with me mental health issues, and during 2018 I had assisted to an interdisciplinary team in Argentina with other women facing similar challenges. So before coming to Oulu I had looked for information about mental health services. I must clarify that in Argentina, my cultural roots, psychological support is a very common issue and there is no stigma to talk about assisting for help. Of course, my diagnosis was not something I would talk out loud to the first person I would meet. But all my family and close friends would eventually, sooner or later, get to know about it. I guess I always knew that it was one of my weaknesses.

In Finland, I first went to the Finnish Students Health Services. Today I feel very grateful with them for their help. Also, my dear Kummi tutor students and tutor teacher were really supportive and understanding when I shared with them my situation. However, I did face some difficult times when I was going through high stress situations. I was suggested by the psychologist and psychiatrist at the Finnish Student Health Services to do more studies about my problem. And that was my pick of stress, I am not a psychologist, but I could call that moment a shock, and lot of pain. Even I had amazing friends and Kummi family in Finland, I felt lonely and without any social support to address a situation of putting myself under lots of studies at a different hospital to my society of origin. I felt lonely in the apartment I was living. I lived in a very small apartment with flat mates I would not talk deep topics, which for me was so important.

I remember how embarrassed I was to share this news with my family. I felt that they would worry so much that they would tell me to go back to Argentina and forget about my studies. I decided to rely on my friends in Oulu, my sister and my friends in Argentina. I will always be grateful with this people. It was at that time, when I heard from other international friends living difficult times, particularly during the summer of 2019. By that time, I had had so many ideas about thesis that I felt quite lost. But it was in that moment, when I heard my friends were “suffering” in terms of their mental health. I thought I had to do something for them, and for myself as well, I guess. I felt that I could contribute with the international community, and also gain experience in the research field. I felt that this was my way to construct a “boat” which would lead me home to Argentina and finish my journey in Finland.

And at that moment I decided my thesis topic. I proposed several ideas or having a research group about it, then I even contacted a student who had run a project at the University of

Cambridge who had carried a documentary called “Feeling Blue”(focused on students’ mental health). I felt that mental health was an issue in other contexts as well. I contacted lots of persons, until I finally had to face this project by myself, but still with orientation from great people that came along this journey. Finally, the Student Union of the University of Oulu supported this project and that was my story shared with participants. Then I believe a process of healing came along when I began to immerse myself in the data and theory. This quote from bell hooks summarises my experience:

“I came to theory because I was hurting-the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend-to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing”. (hooks, 1991, p.59)

Vulnerability

As Tracy (2010, p. 842) argues, I am mindful that sincerity involves vulnerability. In narrative inquiry, research puzzles are also concerned with vulnerabilities (Lessard et al., 2018). Clandinin et al. (2018) describe vulnerability as a fluid concept that can be interpreted in multiple ways and can play a significant role to all dimensions of narrative inquiry (p.7). In this study, vulnerability has been present when I moved alongside the participants, including the processes concerning the co-composition of field texts and representation narrative inquiries in research texts (Lessard et al., 2018, p.1). I was aware throughout the whole thesis process that researching on a topic related to mental health would be challenging for me as a researcher, and for participants in the idea about disclosing issues related to mental health. I felt this vulnerability when I “put myself out there” asking participants to trust me with their stories, which involved personal issues in relation with diverse dimensions of their lives. From my perspective, talking these topics could be difficult for participants, making them feel vulnerable as well. Then, when transcribing and analysing the data, I also felt the connections between power and research (Lessard et al., 2018, p.7), asking myself: what are my responsibilities as a researcher when seeking to answer the research puzzle? What will I tell the audience about students’ stories? Another tension arose when moving the interim to final research texts. As Lessard et al. (2018, p.11) claim:

“It is, as we struggle alongside participants with what to include in final research texts that we face questions once again of what, and how, we show to larger public audiences

and how understandings of naming and vulnerability are always present, always in need of further wonders”.

During the retelling process, I have constantly contemplated my own vulnerabilities and uncertainties. I understood that narrative thinking and reinterpretation of field texts was embedded with uncertainty (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). Thus, I am mindful that any interpretation of events could be tentative and always could be otherwise (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Moreover, I learnt and experienced how narrative inquiry demands a relational research process. Thus, this section is intrinsically connected to the relational ontological commitment that I have discussed previously in methodological framework chapter. This ontological commitment kept me alongside the research participants, attending to their experience as well as my own experience in the research (Clandinin & Murthy, 2009, p.600). It meant an endless transaction between participants’ stories, including mine.

The commitment of collecting and interpreting international students’ experiences field notes, together with the final retelling process compels central issues to the inquiry, such as ethics and concerns about living well with others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 in Caine, 2013, p.578). Clandinin & Murthy (2009, p.600) stress that representation of stories must return to the experiences for validation. This is explained by the relational and co-constructed experience between the researcher and participants (p.600). Creswell and Miller (2000) define validity as “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them”, including the inferences drawn from the data (Schwandt, 1997 in Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.125).

From qualitative and narrative paradigm standpoint I found essential to check with participants if interpretations accurately represented them (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.125). Even though this process took place only once, when I sent early drafts of “Their story” section and parts of “Our story”, seven participants gave constructive and positive feedback on their stories. I followed their additions as well as what to delete from their stories. I acknowledge that as a practitioner researcher, I was then immersed in writing other chapters of the thesis which would respect the back and forth movement between students’ stories and theory. Looking back in time, I would have liked to maintain more exchange of communication with participants throughout the writing process. Nevertheless, I am grateful to have received constructive comments from a psychologist in Argentina, my thesis supervisor and friends who in different ways, helped to build on the validation of this research journey process.

Relational ethics

In this narrative inquiry study, I have engaged in relating and unfolding my story together with participants' stories, in different ways. Nevertheless, this task implied from the beginning, and still represents an ongoing "risky" commitment (Clandinin, Caine & Lessard 2018). I acknowledge therefore that as a narrative inquirer, my first responsibility is always to participants, negotiating with them how the experience will be represented, as well as the moments of entry and exit (Caine et al., 2013, p.578).

Because this research might affect lives of participants and those who live in relation with them (Clandinin, 2016, p.22-23), relationships with participants demand a constant ethical action from the beginning planning process and even after the research is published. Because ethical matters are "never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.170), I locate relational ethics as the central element of the narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, Caine & Lessard, 2018). An ethical self-consciousness and ethics of care impelled me to be mindful of my "character, actions and consequences on others" (Tracy, 2010, p.847), and to acknowledge the connectedness and mutual respect towards participants' stories and lives. I have engaged in a reciprocal and interconnected relation with participants. In other words, I am committed to listen and live alongside the research participants stories (Caine, 2010, p. 1307).

Researching on the borderland

Throughout the whole thesis journey, I have felt a "work-in-progress", paying careful attention to the multiplicity of who I was "in each relationship, over time, and in multiple places"(Lessard 2013, in Lessard, Caine, & Clandinin, 2018, p.3). I must share the difficulty in separating myself from a researcher, my vocation for service and an international student. When interviewing one of the participants, it seemed to me that this student was expecting my guidance as well and help as a senior student. This student's story was focused on very recent or current struggles at the moment of the interview. After the interview ended, following the same data-collection methods as the other participants, I had to take a decision as an international student who had been trained as a Self-hack facilitator. This means that I tried to advice the research participant, from a professional standpoint. Still, I was aware that this would not be included in the data. I also showed this participant other places where to study and concentrate, which was again, out of the research plan or data collection phase. I felt this role was taken as

an ambassador that I was from the University, representing indeed, the international students' community. Thus, I felt a few times in this borderland between my researcher role, and my solidarity as an international student.

Because of this thesis I have found myself crossing cultural discourses as well as institutional boundaries, it is necessary to clarify what means a borderland for narrative inquirers. Borderland spaces refers, in this study, to the spaces of tension, transition and uncertainty "that exist around borders where one lives within the possibility of the multiplicity of different experiences" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007 in Clandinin, 2016, p.137). What matters for narrative inquiry is that these borderland spaces call the researcher to be in constant relation within ontological and epistemological assumptions (Clandinin, 2016, p.138). Also, because narrative inquiry is guided by relational ethics, I learned to "attend closely to each other within these borderlands to honor the multiple lives in relation" (Clandinin, 2016, p.141). Focusing on lives in relation drove me to direct the findings to the international students, since it was their lives at the University of Oulu, as well as my story, which were being unfold in this study. This forced me to work against the dominant university narratives of research, so instead of seeing this study as a project that is completed and finished, I see this study as deeply relational ongoing practice. I am not interested in authorship nor ownership, this is a study that belongs to the international students, particularly to the research participants of this thesis.

8.3 Concluding and opening research puzzles

This study focuses on the lived experiences of postgraduate international students who study at the University of Oulu. It aims to understand what the students feel about their psychological well-being experiences, and to identify how psychological well-being services featured in their stories. Also, as a qualitative study, this section did not aim to present findings as answers, solutions nor generalisations. The findings regarding the student narratives at the University of Oulu should not be generalised to other higher education institutions in Finland nor internationally. Instead, following narrative inquiry as the research methodology and heart of this thesis, the findings aim to build more questions and "puzzles" regarding postgraduate international experiences with psychological well-being and with psychological well-being support services at the University of Oulu.

This study worked with multidimensional concepts, which are psychological well-being, intercultural transitions of postgraduate international students, and internationalisation as well.

Overall, students demanded more holistic, caring and multicultural approaches for psychological well-being support for international students. The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. As mentioned earlier, international students' psychological well-being experiences and their relationship with psychological well-being can be studied from multidimensional ways and cross-cultural lenses. Hence, it is important for higher education policies that encourage internationalisation to take into consideration how psychological well-being is intrinsic to student life, academic performance and internship and employment opportunities. Spirituality may also be key driver for some students' well-being and academic life. Also, it is recommended to tackle language barriers, communication gaps and lack of visibility when students seek for help. As illustrated in students' stories in this study, enabling spaces for listening to international students' concerns, difficulties, fears, and even ideas, could enhance the image of a University that cares for their international students. This caring approach is not top-down centered. In contrary, students identified student guilds, the Student Union, Kummi tutor students as key channels for preventing, informing, and helping international students to cope with psychological well-being while their studies abroad. This study's findings highlight the importance of social networks that surround the student.

Besides aiming to address the two research puzzles of this study, this research has raised more research wonders to explore in the future. First, it is important to address psychological well-being from different theoretical lenses, understanding and listening to each student' cultural background and experience with psychological well-being services. Secondly, further research could focus on the different actors' experiences with international students' psychological well-being. In this way, a multidimensional social network "diagnosis" could enhance further policy decisions for the University of Oulu, in the context of internationalisation of higher education. Moreover, since stories highlighted the weather factor as a catalyzer for psychological well-being experiences, it would be interesting to explore through interdisciplinary and holistic lenses, how environmental factors influence students' psychological well-being, particularly in the case of international students who experience this phenomenon of darkness and extreme cold weather for the first time.

As regards the academic dimension, this study focused on master's degree international students, or postgraduate international students. As a limitation, the thesis did not concentrate on literature regarding psychological well-being processes involved in postgraduate courses. Thus, research participants' psychological well-being experiences regarding master thesis writing was an interesting finding that could be more developed in further research.

It could be also interesting to explore more on the different faculties and how the program itself, including tutor teachers and teachers address international students' psychological well-being. As mentioned before, students differed in the way they had experienced the program and faculty, some more positive and some more negative. Also, this study did not contemplate exchange studies or doctoral students' processes, who also conform international community dealing with other psychological well-being processes that this study did not look at. Moreover, the thesis could not look into Finnish students who also live different psychological well-being experiences at the University of Oulu and in Finland. It is recommended to research on each of these groups mentioned in this point.

Based on their personal experiences, most of participants proposed solutions with diverse approaches to reflect on higher education institutions and medical approaches from health centers, which give this thesis a critical and emancipatory turn related to narrative research. Hence, "it is the responsibility of the host university to provide opportunities to develop strong social and academic networks to enhance the students' resilience" (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016, p.11). In addition, it would be interesting to research more on psychological well-being support services counsellors, nurses, study psychologists, Kummi tutor students, tutor teachers, teachers and Student Union and student guilds narratives regarding psychological well-being of international students in general. Even broadly, this research journey opens a research puzzle on how the Global University and Finnish internationalisation policies is affecting students' well-being. It is suggested as well to research on how current international and national policies discourse take into consideration students' well-being in general.

Finally, this is a small research project, aiming to research on a big research puzzle. Psychological well-being is a broad topic, the same as studying international students' experiences. It is my final intention to honor research participants' lives (Clandinin, 2016, p.143), because as Clandinin (2016) argues, when we start to "re-story" ourselves, we may "begin to shift the institutional, social, and cultural narratives in which we are embedded" (p. 24). In this way, the journey's destination can open new paths that implicate future social action and policy justifications for psychological well-being in internationalisation of higher education (Clandinin, 2016, p. 37).

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Appendix 1: Consent agreement

Researcher: Ana Maria Beltrán, full-time Master's programme students in Education and Globalisation at the University of Oulu in Finland.

Research: This project will collect information about experiences, thoughts and feelings that are manifested in the form of life story relating to the topic of "MENTAL HEALTH AT UNIVERSITY OF OULU: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS".

Confidentiality: If you consent to participate in this research, your feedback, opinions, thoughts, etc. as well as your professional and personal details, will be handled anonymously. The information that you provide may be linked to a random reference number. A recording of the interview, without your name, will be kept in a secure and private folder until the completion of the research process. Once the research process is complete, the recordings will be destroyed.

Choice: Please do not feel under any obligation or expectation to participate in this research. Also, please be aware that if you wish to withdraw from this research process at any time, the information that you have provided will be immediately destroyed and will not be used.

Contact: If you have any questions or concerns in relation to this research, please contact ana.beltran@student.oulu.fi

Agreement: I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Ana Maria Beltran, master's student at the Faculty of Education, University of Oulu, Finland.

I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue my involvement at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no other participant will be informed. I have the right to decline to answer any questions.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from any participant and that my confidentiality as a participant in this research will remain secure.

Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained to me and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw and re-enter at any time.

Please check one of the following:

- ☐ Yes, I wish to be involved.
- ☐ No, I do not wish to be involved, but I understand that my presence will still indirectly affect the research.

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 2: Purnima's notes

14/10/19

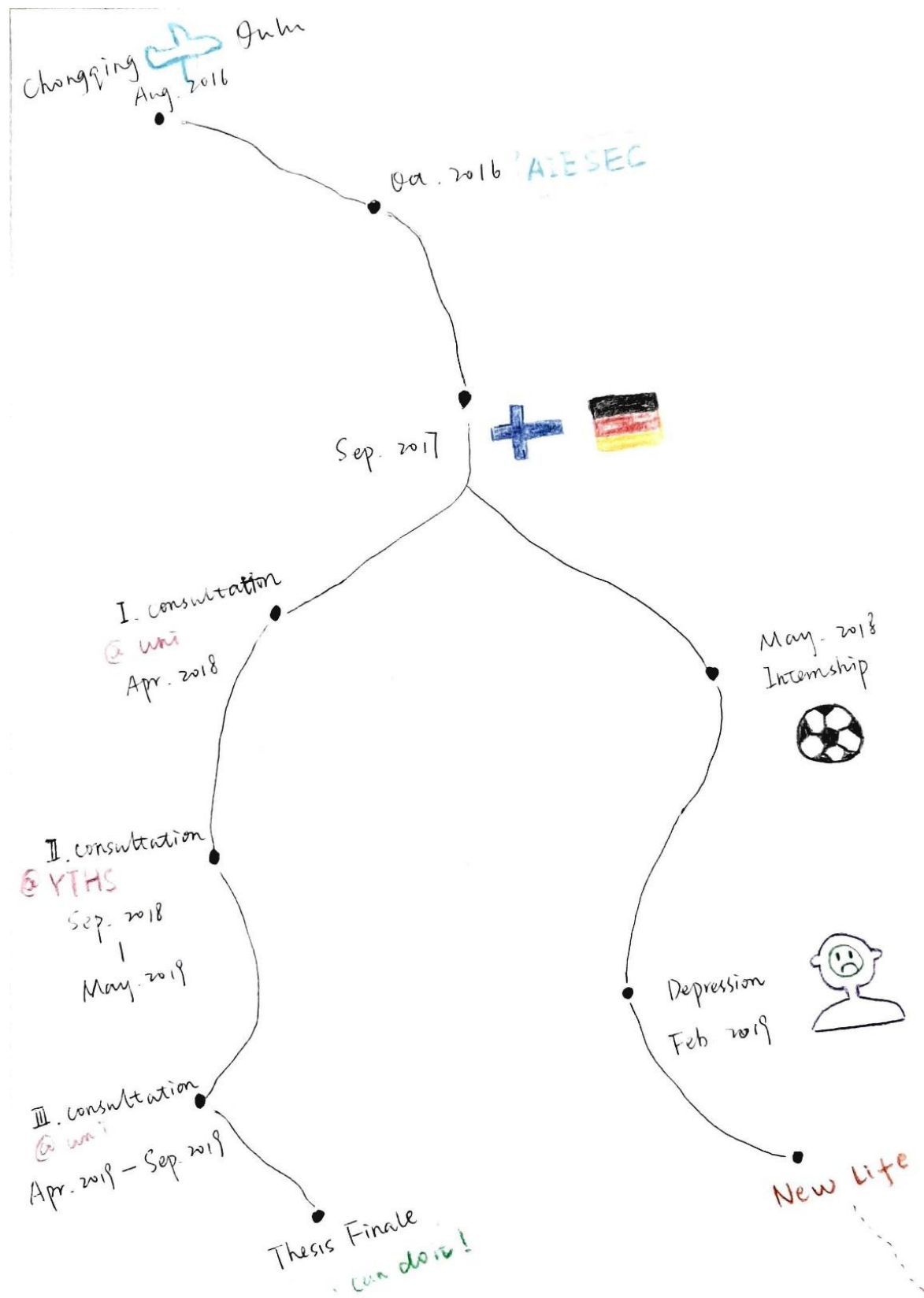
Reflections

- ①
- Getting settled in Airbnb
 - ↓
 - Getting settled into the new apartment
 - ↓
 - Cooking together with friends
 - ↓
 - Interactions with Kummi & teachers
 - ↓
 - Meeting my Kummi parents
 - ↓
 - Joining team — Making new friends/
networks/contacts
- ②
- Getting in touch with dancing & collaborating with others during International Cultural Fest
 - Sharing moments with Kummi family
 - Birthday celebrations.
 - First time when I told my friends in Delhi about my anxiety disorder
 - Doing outdoor sports in the winters
 - Spring-time group work
 - Experiencing snowfall for the first time
 - Doing grocery shopping for the first time; in a completely Finnish store.
 - Purchasing my first bike in Delhi

- ③
- Winter darkness was harsh → major anxiety trigger
 - Conversations with family back home were difficult
 - Non-availability of a direct answer ~~about~~ ^{from} my kummi about counselling services on-campus
 - Inability to get in touch with a counselor in Dulu.
 - Experiencing a distance from most of my course-teachers was very demotivating
 - It was challenging to not make alcohol as an escape route.
 - Figuring out summer plans for May-August 2019 was stressing me out

- ④
- All of my friends in Dulu
 - Meeting kummi family
 - Joining a yoga class was helpful
 - Biking

Appendix 3: Sangmu's timeline drawing



Appendix 4: Mai's timeline drawing

